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PARTED BY TREACHERY; OR, AFTER CLASP OF WEDDED HANDS.

BY HARRIET IRVING,

AUTHOR OF "A MAN'S SACRIFICE," "FLEEING FROM LOVE," ETC., ETC.



"IT'S ALL UP WITH HIM—BLACK PRINCE MUST BE SHOT!"

Parted by Treachery;

OR,

After Clasp of Wedded Hands,

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AUTHOR OF "A MAN'S SACRIFICE," "FLEEING FROM LOVE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A BROKEN LIFE.

MIDNIGHT in a great city. A dozen church clocks had just rung out the hour, the strokes sounding clear and distinct in the crisp, frosty air. One by one the lights were disappearing from the windows of the dingy, narrow, many-storied houses which constituted one of the densely populated and ill-drained streets abounding in the poor quarters of the vast metropolis.

The street in which the first scene of this story is laid was perhaps a little less grimy than its neighbors, and it certainly kept far better hours than the generality of its kind, for the inhabitants were chiefly of the working class, people who had to work hard for their bread, rising very early in the morning, and so must take their rest betimes.

In one of the highest and narrowest of those houses, however, a feeble glimmer yet shone through the uncurtained window of a room very near the top indeed, and had so shone from sunset until sunrise for many days and weeks previously.

It was a wretched little lamp which gave that slender light; a lamp that had a way of flaring up, and even at times of going out, without any apparent reason; a lamp that smelt, that charred its wick, and blackened its cracked chimney, and, in fact, did everything that an ill-conditioned lamp could do.

The room in which it stood was little more than a garret, with low ceiling and white-washed walls, whereon the damp stood in great patches.

A couple of cane-seated chairs, one of them possessing only three legs; a small, rickety table, propped up by a large box; and in one corner a thin straw mattress, on which was thrown a moth-eaten blanket, comprised the entire furniture, while a few shavings and a handful of small coal burned in the fireplace. Burned, did I say? no, rather smoldered, and died out. And this on a bitterly cold January evening, when the thermometer had fallen nearly to zero.

Seated at the little table was a man seemingly about thirty-five years of age, whose eyes were haggard and bloodshot, while his features wore a curious pinched expression that one sees in the countenances of—thank God!—only a few mortals.

There he sat, his long, thin hands plunged deep in his thick hair, his gaze fixed upon the paper before him, thinking—thinking—all to no effect. The stump of a pen remained in the stone ink-bottle, and the hours rolled on. First one o'clock sounded, then two o'clock struck slowly and solemnly, and the flame of the little lamp waved and flickered as an icy current of air found its way through the ill-hung window-sash.

The man shivered, and pulled his thin coat closer together round his chest; then suddenly pushing back his chair, he rose, and, walking unsteadily to the mantle-piece, laid his arms wearily thereon, and his aching head on the folded arms.

"So it has come at last!" he murmured, with a long-drawn sigh; "this is to be the end of all! My strength is gone; my thoughts are confused, I must give it up; lie down and die! Oh, God! it is hard that this should be the end of my joyless, bitter life! Yet why should I complain?—why should I regret leaving the world? It has not been a kind friend to me. It must be that I am weak, unnerved, to-night; for at any other time I should have hailed with rapture the death that brought

with it rest, forgetfulness. But now—now when it is near—when it stares me in the face—I shudder—I shrink!"

A low, sobbing moan burst from his lips.

"How will they find me to-morrow?" he continued, after a pause. "Will Mrs. Power, hard, merciless woman as she is, feel some pang of pity, however slight, for the lodger who lies cold and dead before her, with no one near to catch his last sigh, no one to close his eyes, no one who loved him?"

His voice had sunk to a whisper with the last words, and, for a time, nothing was heard in the room but his hard, irregular breathing.

He must have stayed in the same position for more than an hour. The lamp had gone out, and the moon's soft rays were flooding the cheerless little room with light, when he next raised his head, while the wind had all subsided, and there was an unnatural stillness in the air.

Slowly and laboriously like one walking in his sleep, he drew near to the window, and, leaning against the wall, looked out into the calm beauty of the night; gazing with dim saddened eyes far, far up into the cloudless heavens, where the moon rode in all her majestic loveliness, as if he would fain pierce the veil that lay between him and the eternal mysteries beyond.

For a few brief moments he stood there with upturned face, the moonlight softening down the hard lines and curves upon it. Then, with a heavy sigh, he turned away, and, all dressed as he was, threw himself on his miserable pallet.

There he lay, as he thought, for his last sleep, with half-closed eyes, his hands clasped across his breast, a prayer for mercy trembling on his lips.

By-and-by his mind began to wander; thoughts of bygone days and pleasant fancies filled his brain; faces that he had loved passed before him; voices he had known sounded in his ears. He was a child once more, standing by his mother's knee; he could see the diamonds flash on her white hand—how they sparkle in the firelight. But it is all a dream—a fantasy! That tender mother had died more than a quarter of a century ago! Had he not seen her sweet face lie at peace within the coffin? Could he ever forget the strange, mysterious smile which hovered on the marble lips?

Hark! the organ strains are echoing through the aisles. The burst of melody ascends to the vaulted roof—even to heaven itself. He fancies himself in church, and hears the old gray-haired clergyman speaking. His hand is raised—his voice distinct and solemn. What are the words he is speaking?

"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

He is not a child, but a man, young and strong, in the first bloom of manhood, who stands before the altar, hand in hand with a fair girl, whose eyes look love into his own. She bends forward—nearer, nearer—until her soft red lips touch his.

"Cecil—Cecil, my wife!" he cried in a choking voice.

Then all was blank.

"But Mrs. Power, listen to reason. I, a doctor, say he *cannot* be moved. It would lie on my conscience if that man were taken from his bed and driven through those cold streets. Act like a Christian, my good woman."

"Don't you 'good woman' me, sir, for I won't stand it. It's my house, and out of it he shall go as sure as I be a living woman. It's likely I'm going to have an illness and maybe a death, with a pauper's funeral, here! It'd ruin me for life with my other tenants. No, indeed!"

"Then, if he dies, his death will be upon your head."

"I don't care if fifty deaths are on my head. I ain't a-going to let my rooms to corpses, and he's near one already," said the woman, coarsely. "No; I've sent my gal for an ambulance, and into it he shall go, bag and

baggage. The hospital's the best place for him. He owes me for over a week's rent now, and when I'm to see the color of his money is more than I can tell. By rights I should keep back his clothes."

And she fingered the wretched man's threadbare jacket furtively, when, meeting the doctor's eyes, something in their expression caused her to drop it hurriedly, and "Hem!" apologetically behind her apron.

"I'm soft-hearted, that's what I be," she began, plaintively. "It'll be the ruin o' me one of these days. But I hain't the heart to take the poor feller's rags from him; no I hain't."

The young surgeon sighed as he looked from the strong-built, red-faced woman at his side to the prone, helpless form lying so still and quiet before him. But he was very poor—miserably poor—himself, and could do nothing to help in the matter.

"What do you know of this man? What is his name?" was his next question.

The landlady had quite regained her composure, and spoke in her usual blustering tone.

"I know no more o' him than that chair. He came here nigh upon six weeks back, and took my room. That's enough for me. It's none of my business to inquire into who my lodgers are, so long as they pay their money reg'lar. That's all I want; and this one did that up to last week, or he'd 'a' been turned out pretty sharp, I can tell you!"

"What did he do for a living? You know that, at least, I suppose?"

"Not I, nor care! He'd sit over them papers for hours at a time. I've heard him moving about before it's light o' morning. But there! his writin's on the table now. You can look for yourself."

The young man walked across the room, and glanced at the well-strewn table. He turned over some of the sheets of paper, then shook his head gently.

"I see—I see!" he muttered, under his breath, as he came softly back to the low pallet-bed, and once more leaned over his patient.

"What do you guess is the matter with him?" he said, abruptly.

The landlady did not answer, but twisted the corner of her apron.

"Starvation!" said the doctor, jerking out his words—"simply and literally starvation!"

Again there was a silence. Presently the ambulance was heard, as it rattled and jolted over the stony streets.

"Now, my poor fellow, you must run your chance of life with the best of us," the young surgeon resumed, apostrophizing the unconscious man. "After all, I don't know that it is not better for you to hazard the experiment of getting to a place where you will receive all care, than for you to be left to the tender mercies of mine hostess. A man can die but once."

Then turning to the landlady, he spoke very sternly:

"I shall take him just as he is to the hospital—bed, bed-clothes, and all. You needn't fear that you will lose any of your valuable property; it shall be brought back to you this afternoon without fail. Now, one word—remember, if you wish in future to be treated well by your fellow-creatures, you had better begin at once by showing a little kindness to others. That you, a woman, perhaps a mother, could see a fellow-being actually starve to death before your very eyes—Pah! it sickens me to think of it!"

"Come, march out o' this!" cried the landlady in a fury, her arms akimbo, her face crimson with passion—"you and that bag o' bones! I won't stay no longer to be called names in my own house! I've been a fool to stand it as long as I hev! Now, out you go, or I'll know the reason why!"

Without more ado, the doctor bodily lifted the unconscious man in his arms, and carried him down the narrow, creaking flight of stairs, unmindful of the curious looks and jeering taunts of sundry other tenants, who clus-

tered round the doorway, watching the triumphal progress of the young surgeon and his charge.

Some of the more unruly spirits even followed them the length of the street, yelling and screaming like a pack of demons let loose upon the world.

The sight of a well-known cap and uniform, however, quickly dispersed them, and the two men were allowed to proceed in peace.

Once fairly on their way to the hospital, the doctor gave a sigh of relief, and turned his attention once more to his patient, settling his head more comfortably upon his pillow.

Roused by the movement, the poor sufferer opened his eyes, and looked bewilderedly into the kindly face above him.

"Where am I?" he asked very faintly; but before the question could be answered had fainted once more.

But his troubles were over for the time. When he next recovered his senses, he was lying in a white bed, in a cheerful ward; gentle hands busied about him—sympathizing faces on all sides.

A blissful content stole over him—feelings to which he had long been a stranger lulled him to rest. It was unspeakably pleasant to the world-worn, weary man to be thus soothed and cared for.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE HOSPITAL.

FOR weeks the stranger lay in that little white bed, not caring even to rouse himself back to life. Surely it was better, he thought, to die now, when, perhaps, the kind nurse who attended him would feel some sorrow, some pity, would give if but one sigh of regret for the poor, friendless, homeless wanderer who was dying alone in a hospital ward.

He had a morbid longing for some one to feel sorrow for his death, and his pathetic remarks upon the subject would sometimes bring tears to his attendant's eyes.

When the physician came on his rounds one day, he stayed long by the stranger's bed, looking down thoughtfully at the calm, placid face, which had scarcely more color than the pillow on which it rested.

"I can't understand this perplexing patient of ours, nurse," he said, in an undertone, stroking his chin meditatively; "he gets neither better nor worse. He is obedient?—taking what you offer him, eh?"

"I've never had to do with a better, sir! He just swallows what I give him, without a word; and he's so thankful and grateful for anything that is done for him!"

"Then he's like the rest," the doctor rejoined—"he wants rousing; and unless he is most effectually roused, and that soon, he'll just drift quietly away!"

An hour later the physician's brougham, with its handsome pair of high-stepping gray horses and severely respectable coachman, stood at the hospital door, and the doctor himself (who, by the way, was a very grand man indeed, totally unlike the poor practitioner we met in the lodging-house), having finished his round of inspection, was standing hard by, leisurely drawing on his gloves and giving his servant some directions.

Suddenly he was accosted by a gentleman, who was buttoned up to the chin in a rough ulster, and who raised his derby as he spoke.

"Pardon me, sir, but are you not the visiting physician to the Chamber Street Hospital?"

The doctor bowed in acquiescence.

"I found out only this morning that a poor friend of mine was brought here a month or more ago."

"Very possibly," was the dry response; "but I require further particulars. Many cases have entered since the date you give. They come in every day—every hour. Why was your friend admitted?—an accident?"

An expression of keen pain passed over the gentleman's countenance, and he spoke with some difficulty.

"I was away at the time, otherwise I am sure such a thing would not have occurred. As it is, I grieve to say he was brought here dying of starvation!"

"Ah! and you wish to see him, I presume. You are aware that this is not one of the visiting days?"

"I am, but—" He hesitated. Then abruptly, "Oh, sir, do help me! If you only knew how anxious I have been—"

"Well, well!" the doctor interrupted. "Jerome," to the coachman, "drive twice slowly round the square, then return here. Now, young gentleman, I am at your service. Follow me."

And he led the way into a plainly-furnished sitting-room.

He gave a scrutinizing look at the stranger; one of those keen, penetrating glances that told him at once the sort of person he had to deal with.

The inspection apparently satisfied him, for his brow cleared, and he gave a sigh of relief.

Though the young man's age could not be more than two or three-and-twenty, there was nothing at all boyish about him, with the exception of a certain outspoken unaffectedness, which sometimes, and it is to be regretted, disappears with increasing years.

"Before letting you go up-stairs," said the doctor, "I should like to have a few minutes' conversation with you. In the first place, I must own to a most unprofessional curiosity concerning the former life of my patient and your friend. Have you any objection to gratify it? It might assist me in my treatment of him."

"I only wish I knew myself," replied the young man; "but the fact is he is little more than a stranger even to me. However, I will tell you all I know, and you can draw your own conclusions. Some eight or ten months ago I was the means of preventing him from having a very nasty accident. He was crossing Broadway by Fulton street, when all of a sudden he slipped and fell, just as a hack came tearing round the corner. In another moment the wheels would have been on him had I not, in the nick of time, managed to drag him away. By Jove, sir, it was a near thing, too! He was a big-made man, you see, all arms and legs. He got his foot crushed, as it was, with the brute of a horse."

The doctor smiled involuntarily as he saw how totally unconscious the young fellow was that he had done anything commendable.

"Well, I got him home that day—he was in tolerably decent quarters then—and somehow we took a fancy to each other directly. He was doing work for some printers, revising and correcting MSS. or something of the sort, and I fancy was very badly paid, but was always so taciturn about his affairs; while as to accepting any favor at my hands—why, sir, it would have been as much as my life was worth to suggest such a thing, he was so confoundedly proud! I concluded that he had quarreled with his people, for he never mentioned home or family. He gave his name as Lambert, but I dare say that was not the real one. He was a gentleman decidedly, and once he spoke of having taken honors at Harvard."

He paused.

"Well?" queried the doctor, who had been listening intently.

The young man's face fell, and he sighed heavily.

"The rest can be told in a few words. The last three months I spent with my mother traveling. When I returned, I went at once to see my friend. I found his rooms deserted and the landlady unable to tell me where he had gone; indeed, she knew nothing whatever about him, except that he left her soon after my departure.

"After a useless search, which has seemed unending, I to-day learned quite by accident that he was brought here. That is all I have to say."

"Now it is my turn to speak," said the physician, who had risen from his chair, and was pacing up and down the room. "Your friend came here in a very bad state—a very bad state indeed; but nourishment and careful nursing has brought him round. But—"

"But?" echoed the young gentleman.

"Eut," said the doctor once more, turning round on him sharply, "he won't live, and, what's more, has made up his mind to die, and die he surely will if that stubborn will of his can't be bent. Ah, you may stare! Nevertheless, during an experience of over forty years I have met with several similar cases; and it often happens that in this—disease we will call it, for disease it is—the great thing we doctors have to combat with is the one desire above all others that the patients have to die—yes, positively, it is a fact. I have had them say to me again and again, 'Oh, doctor you are cruel, calling me back to life! Why didn't you let me die in peace?' And who can blame them? Poor wretches! what is life to them but a constant struggle, a warfare with disease and want? However, I must not keep my horses waiting any longer in the cold, so will just tell you in a few words what I want you to do for your friend. Well, then, Mr.—"

"Temple—Frank Temple is my name."

"Mr. Temple, do something, anything that will rouse him and make him take an interest in life. Whatever influence you may have with him exert now, for if you do not, I give you my word as a doctor all my skill will avail nothing."

The young man sighed hopelessly.

"You have given me a hard task, sir, and I don't know how to set about it. You make me in a way feel as if I were responsible for the life of my friend." And he gave a little, uncomfortable laugh.

"No, no, no!" the doctor, ejaculated; "not quite so bad as that. Come, young sir, do your best; that's all I want. Now, let us go up-stairs. I will just show you the ward in which our patient lies, and leave the rest to you."

"This is it. Step softly right up to that bed at the far end. I will give orders that you are not disturbed. Put a brave face on the matter, and Heaven prosper you."

With an encouraging nod, the kind-hearted doctor hurried away.

Young Temple stood for a moment at the door of the long ward, positively lacking the courage to enter, dreading the ordeal through which he was about to pass more than words can tell.

At last, with an effort, he advanced into the room, and threaded his way between the two rows of white beds, each with its suffering occupant, up to the one he had been directed to at the far end.

He had walked with tolerably firm steps so far; yet when he reached the bedside he was glad to sink into a chair that the thoughtful nurse pushed toward him. He thought he had prepared himself for a change, however great, in the friend who had suffered so much during the few months of his absence. But now! Had it not been for very shame, he could have wept like a child at the wreck before him.

He took the thin hand that lay outstretched on the coverlet, and stroked it gently. He felt an added tenderness—a love almost resembling that of a mother for her child—as his pitying eyes surveyed the gaunt, emaciated frame, the hollow, haggard cheeks of the man who had been so near death's door.

He bent over the still form; but no movement was apparent.

"Noel—Noel, dear old fellow!" he said, in his clear young voice; "speak to me; it is I—Frank! Won't you speak to me?"

Slowly the heavy lids were raised.

"Ah, Frank, it is you! Come to see the last of me, dear boy? Soon over now, Frank—soon over now!"

A pause. Then the weary eyes closed once more.

The young man knelt down, and placed his lips near to his friend's ear.

"Noel, I have come here to speak to you—on purpose to speak seriously to you. Can you listen to me? Press my hand if you hear what I say."

The long, claw-like fingers tightened round the warm, firm clasp.

Then Frank drew a long breath, and continued, making his words sound clear and distinct, though there was a lump in his throat all the time:

"In the first place, Noel, I tell you that you are not going to die yet—you are not *near* death—you have many years of life,"—gradually warming as he spoke. "You may outlive me—yes, you may; I say so, and you know I wouldn't tell you a lie."

He knew the eyes were looking at him in faint surprise; but he feigned to take no notice.

A sudden idea had occurred to him, and he resolved to act upon it.

"Noel," he began again, his voice yet more earnest, "the doctors say that if you like you may live—do you hear?—that it simply and literally rests with you, upon your own individual will, whether you live or die. Now, granting this, has it struck you that in choosing death you are acting the part of a coward?"

"A coward!" echoed the voice from the bed, with more animation than had been shown before. "No man shall dare call me a coward!"

"No!" cried Frank, warmly; "but I should call the man one who sneaks meanly out of the world because he has not the moral courage, the manliness, to fight against the few little trials and troubles he may have to encounter in it. For shame, Noel—for shame! I thought you were made of better stuff than that."

He stopped to note the effect of his words. There was a faint flush on the sick man's face, and his eyes were widely opened enough then.

"You speak very plainly," he said at length; "but I never thought of it in that light. Oh, Frank, boy, you don't know what my life has been—what a boon death would have been! It isn't as if I had given up weakly at first without a struggle. I am so tired of the battle—I so long for rest! Death is so near my grasp. Is it a—cowardly act to seize it?"

"It is—it is!" Frank cried, vehemently, the tears rushing to his eyes; "a mean, base thing that you will never be guilty of! Noel, old fellow, I'm not much given to preaching, you know, and I dare say I haven't been a whit better than other young men of my age; but yet is it right, do you think, to throw away your life just because you are tired of it—just because you are sick to death of the whole thing? No—a thousand times no! Be up and doing. Don't let that foolish, wicked pride of yours stand in your way—that pride that won't let you accept anything from another lest it should lower you, be beneath you. Don't let things weigh you down. Fight against them all. *Resolve* to succeed, and don't, like a senseless child, give in just because the world seems too hard for you. There, old boy, that's the first and last sermon I shall ever give you."

He waited anxiously for some response; but none came. Noel had turned his face to the wall, and was motionless.

With a heavy heart, Frank rose from his chair.

It was all in vain, then. His talking evidently had fallen on deaf ears. Well, well, he had done his best, though that best had lost him his friend.

He could not go without some leave-taking, though. He stooped and touched with his lips the pallid cheek.

Still no sign—no word; so, quietly, he turned away, with an aching heart.

He had only taken a very few steps, however, when he fancied he heard his name called in a faint voice.

"Do you want me, Noel? Can I do anything for you?" he asked. "I—I was going

away, old boy. I was afraid I had offended you."

Then his heart smote him with contrition as he looked at his friend's face. It was strangely moved and perturbed. The features were working as with some deep emotion, and there were actual tears glistening in the large dark eyes.

Instantly he was by his side, clasping the thin hand eagerly, bending to catch the words, so low, so humble:

"Please Heaven, I'll be a different man tomorrow!"

CHAPTER III.

A MAIDEN FAIR TO SEE.

AN afternoon in September. The sun was shining brightly, but there was a certain crispness in the air which told that winter was not very far distant, and already the leaves were beginning to fall from the maple trees that stood either side of the avenue leading to Charteris Park.

Charteris Park was a glorious old place. Situated on the Hudson with its acres of velvety lawn sloping down to the water, it was but an hour's ride from the great metropolis, and on the outskirts of one of those picturesque villages which line the banks of the lovely river, it was a property of which its owner might well be proud.

And who was its owner? A woman—a mere girl—over whose bright head only eighteen years had passed, Dorothy Charteris was indeed one of fortune's favorites. She was the happy possessor of youth, health, beauty and wealth, and, more than all, of a heart warm and loving as the day, ever ready to relieve and sympathize with those in trouble.

When Vane Charteris died three years ago, he knew he was leaving his motherless girl among friends, not servants only, who would consider her welfare as their own. Nor was his trust misplaced. Each and every neighbor looked upon Miss Dolly as in some way a precious possession confided to his care, and loved and honored her accordingly.

She had a guardian, it is true; but his duties were merely nominal. He had apartments somewhere up in the dusty, crowded city, and contented himself with running down now and then for a week at a time, to satisfy himself, as he said, that things were going on well, and that his ward kept in good health and spirits.

"Why your father made me your guardian, my dear," he would say sometimes, "utterly puzzles me. All your servants are so outrageously trustworthy, your manager so—so—what shall I say?—confoundedly honest, that the reins of government might with impunity have been left in your own small hands. With such steady horses you would never come to grief."

And Dolly would laugh, and say that perhaps some day the horses might turn restive and take the bit in their mouths and run away; that she couldn't do without her dear, steady old coachman, and a great deal more of the same sort, speaking all the while with her soft cheek leaning against his shoulder, and her hands clasped round his arm.

At the epithet "old" he winced, and a dusky red slowly crept up to his brown forehead.

Conyers Darcy had, all unknown to herself, loved the young girl at his side almost from the time when, resplendent in embroidered frock and big blue sash, he had danced her on his knee; she, a mite of three, and he a tall black-haired stripling of twenty. His love had grown with his growth, all the more intense for being suppressed; yet he well knew that she only looked upon him as a dear friend—a brother, nothing more; and he sometimes had to bite his lip to keep down the hurried, passionate words he longed to speak.

Though Dorothy was but fifteen when her father died, Mr. Charteris had discerned Conyers's love for her, and when he lay upon his death-bed, he sent his daughter from the room and beckoning to the young lawyer, seized his

hand, and drew his face down to a level with his own.

"You love her—I see it!" he said. "Then I shall not leave my child alone in the world! I have made you her guardian. You will know what that means. What better guardian can a woman have than her husband? Marry her the day she is eighteen!"

"But she may not be willing—may not care for me," Conyers had interposed. "I would not bias her for the world."

"Pshaw!—nonsense!" interrupted the dying man, irritably. "Tell her it is my wish. She has never disobeyed me yet, and is not likely to begin now. Don't let her see any one else. It is easily managed. There! that's at an end. Now send for the parson."

But Dolly's birthday—that eventful eighteenth birthday—had come and gone, and she never knew what her father's last words had been.

Of late, Darcy's visits to Charteris Park had been more frequent. He fancied he had detected in Dolly a growing partiality for young Frank Temple's society, and he told himself that it was his duty to see what kind of a man his ward had selected as her lord and master. He was determined she should have no spendthrift, no reckless, extravagant youngster to fritter away her money.

Charles Temple had been one of Vane Charteris's greatest friends. Their gates were separated by hardly more than the breadth of a road, and little Frank had learned to consider Charteris Park almost as much his home as Temple Terraces.

Dolly and he were like brother and sister until he went to school and she had been given a severe-looking French governess, who at once took the poor child under her especial wing, and allowed no indiscriminate rambling about under the grand old trees.

Then came Frank's college days; and so time went on. Both grew up into manhood and womanhood, and there was never quite the same unrestraint. The dear old childish days were gone, never to return.

Charteris Park, Dolly's home, was a rambling, ivy-grown old house, with many irregular, quaintly-shaped windows, long corridors, and odd flights of queer, narrow, break-neck stairs that one came across in out-of-the-way nooks and corners. The building itself had no architectural beauty to recommend it; but such as it was, Dolly loved it devotedly, being fully persuaded that there was no place to equal it. There she was born; there she would die, she often declared. She desired no happier fate than to live and die among her people.

On that sunny afternoon she was walking up and down on the graveled terrace in front of the house, her head bent low, evidently in deep thought, for her brows were contracted, and now and then she gave a deep sigh.

She was dressed for a ride, and the tight-fitting dark blue habit she wore showed off her rounded figure to perfection. Her chestnut hair was loosely coiled up under a little black hat; usually she wore it in a curling mass half-way down her back, but lately she had taken to dressing it in a more womanly fashion. With the whip she held in her right hand she was mercilessly cutting off the tops of the low-growing shrubs which lined her path.

Suddenly she looked up and uttered a slight exclamation, and her cheeks were just a little pinker than usual as she ran to a French window and tapped hurriedly at it.

"Mrs. Marchmont," she cried excitedly, as a lady appeared in answer to her summons, "do, please, come out here for one moment; I want you to see Frank Temple's friend—you know I spoke to you of him yesterday; only make haste, for they are taking the short cut through our grounds to the village. I really think he is the handsomest man I have ever seen!"

"May I come too, and see the favored individual who has found so much favor in my ward's eyes?" said a laughing voice, as Mr.

Darcy followed Mrs. Marchmont through the open window, and stood on the terrace at her side. "Really, Dolly, I can't say that I admire your taste. I see nothing worth looking at in that very tall, very thin specimen of humanity. He may improve upon a nearer view, certainly; but at present, Frank seems to me a much handsomer fellow."

He glanced curiously at her as he spoke.

"Oh, my dear guardian!" Dolly exclaimed. "Frank is a dear boy; but as to being good-looking, why, there isn't a perfect feature in his face. Now, Mrs. Marchmont, you be the judge."

She turned eagerly round, but the person to whom she appealed had disappeared.

"I forgot all about her neuralgia," said Dolly, penitently. "How thoughtless I was! Of course, the air was too cold for her, and she has gone in. Oh, guardian!" suddenly clasping her hands round his arm, "I can never be thankful enough to you for bringing her to me. I love her more and more every day."

"So you are grateful to me for something, at least, eh? No, no, child! I didn't mean that; you have never been wanting in gratitude to me, at any rate. Here comes your steed, my dear. I will just wait to mount you, and then be off. I almost wish I were going with you to-day."

"And won't you? Oh, do!" coaxingly. "They can saddle a horse for you in a moment, and it is such a time since you have been for a ride with me."

He shook his head comically.

"Can't be done; the thing's impossible. A holiday with me means something more than play all day. I have ten hours' work before I sleep to-night. *Au revoir!* Take care of yourself!"

Very lovingly he gazed after the slight figure of the girl as she trotted briskly down the avenue; then, with a deep sigh, he walked back into the house.

CHAPTER IV.

MORE BITTER THAN DEATH.

MEANWHILE, in an upper room whose windows commanded the whole extent of the lawn, Mrs. Marchmont, the salaried companion and chaperon of the young heiress, was pacing back and forth with quick, irregular steps, her head thrown back, and both hands tightly clasping her brow. The small close-fitting widow's cap had fallen unheeded to the ground, and some of the fair hair, which grew so luxuriantly on the well-shaped head, had escaped from its fastenings, and partly shielded her agonized features.

No words issued from her pale lips, but instead deep, tearless sobs, which seemed to shake her frail form from head to foot. At last, with a moan of intensest anguish, she threw herself exhausted on the floor.

"Have I the whole work to do over again?" she cried, brokenly. "Must I leave the home where for the first time I have found something resembling peace? Why do you come here? -oh, why do you come here?" she repeated, throwing her arms high in the air. "Are you not content with once wrecking my life?"

For some time she remained there in her crouching attitude, her face hidden in her hands. Then, acting upon a basely-formed resolution, she suddenly rose, and after having bathed her eyes and cheeks with cold water, descended the broad oak staircase, and timidly knocked at the door of the library.

"Come in!" was the response.

But, imagining it to be a servant, Conyers Darcy did not immediately look up. When he did raise his eyes, however, he gave an exclamation of dismay.

"Good heavens! my dear Mrs. Marchmont; how terribly ill you look! What is the matter? Can I help you in any way?"

He pushed forward the most comfortable arm-chair that the room contained, and almost forced her into it; then, pouring out a glass of

wine from a decanter which stood on the side-board, he held it to her lips.

"No, I won't let you speak until you have taken this, and then you shall tell me anything you like. There, that is better! You have more color in your cheeks already. Will you stay quiet for just ten minutes while I finish this page, and then I will listen to you?"

For the stipulated time the pen traveled swiftly over the paper, and Mrs. Marchmont lay back in her chair, nervously clasping and unclasping her hands, her breath coming in quick, irregular gasps, which threatened to end in positive sobs.

When Darcy drew near to her, she started violently, and the eyes that met his were piteous in their misery; but he feigned to take no notice, and began speaking in purposely slow and even tones.

"Am I right in my conjecture that your agitation is owing to the old trouble—that you have had news of—him?"

"More than that," she replied, trying to imitate his calmness, but failing utterly. "I—I have seen him! And, oh! Mr. Darcy, what shall I do? What is to become of me? I must leave this home, where I thought myself so secure, where I have been so happy, and be friendless, shelterless, once more."

Her voice gave way, and, covering her face with her hands, she cried bitterly.

Darcy was in perplexity. He never could stand a woman's tears. He fidgeted, cleared his throat, moved his chair back and forth; then, getting up, strode to the other end of the room, and began reading the titles of the books on the shelves.

Presently he felt a light touch on his sleeve.

"Forgive me; I am very foolish—very childish—but I promise you I will not offend again."

He turned round, relieved.

"Ah, that is right! Now we shall get on very well. I will stand by the window and hear your story, and afterward we will discuss as to what is best to be done."

He placed himself where, his own face unseen, he could scan every line of her countenance.

"Yes; I will keep nothing back," she began. "I will trust you fully. I at least owe you that. Do you remember, Mr. Darcy, that when you engaged me as companion for your ward, now more than a year ago, I gave you some few particulars of my past life; not that you required so much from me—no, you were too generous for that—but I thought it only due to you before accepting the situation so opportunely offered me—only due to your great kindness toward me, to give you some slight idea of my life before I met you, but you will never understand what I suffered."

"But why revert to those sad days?" he answered, soothingly. "They are past and gone. Why torment yourself with what is over?"

"Because I must return to them," she said, hopelessly. Then, after a short pause, "I told you once that all my troubles were connected with my husband; that it was imperative that he should not discover my whereabouts, and you never questioned me further—never sought to probe my secret. How can I tell you what your trust and confidence have been to me?"

She would have seized and kissed his hand, but he prevented her.

"There may be many bright days in store for you yet," he told her cheerfully. "You are too young to be so hopeless; besides, you wrong both Miss Charteris and me when you talk as you do. It is not likely that we shall let you pass out of our lives in the very unceremonious manner you propose. Dolly would be hurt, indeed, if she could hear what a very bad opinion you have of her friendship."

He succeeded in bringing a faint smile to her lips, but it soon faded away, as clasping her hands tightly together and sitting upright in her chair, she began her story.

"I will suppress nothing except the names," she said, "and those I have no right to tell

you. When I was just seventeen I was married to a man much my superior in wealth and position, but that did not prevent our loving each other. For the first two years of our marriage how happy I was—oh, how perfectly happy! for I had no thought of anything but our two selves.

"My husband's father had objected to the match on the score of my means—I was the only daughter of a poor clergyman; but when he saw how his son's heart was set upon me he withdrew his opposition, and soon grew as fond of me as if I were his daughter.

"Then, one day there came a change. A cousin and old college friend of my husband's passed the summer with us, and with his arrival my happiness terminated.

"From the first he had pestered me with his insulting attentions, but in so crafty, so wily a manner, that there was nothing I could really lay hold of to complain to my husband. I told him once that I disliked his cousin, but he only laughed at me, and bade me not be unreasonable. So what could I do? I did not wish to be the one to bring disagreement between him and one of his oldest friends.

"However, the climax at last came. I shall never forget it! Many and many a time since then have I recalled every word, every look even of that scene."

She gave a long quivering sigh.

"It happened that one sultry afternoon, tired out with the heat, I fell asleep on the couch in my boudoir, and I had a dream—a terrible dream. I thought that a large serpent had wound its coils tight round my body, so suffocatingly close that I could scarcely breathe. Try what I could, I could not escape from its folds; and while I gazed at it in fascinated horror, it advanced its head, with its cruel, gleaming eyes fixed upon my own, nearer and nearer, until it touched my cheek. My senses seemed leaving me, when, with one supreme effort, I awoke—awoke to find myself in the coils of a serpent, indeed, a serpent in human form—awoke to find myself clasped in the arms of my husband's false friend, his hateful face close to my face, his lips pressed to mine!"

"How I freed myself I hardly know, nor the words I used when I could command myself sufficiently to speak, but I remember how I told him, in no measured terms, that I would be silent no longer; that my husband should see him at last in his true colors, and would horsewhip him from his house, like the base hound he was!"

"And he?" queried Darcy, who was strangely interested.

"And he—only laughed a scornful, sardonic laugh.

"Your husband!" he sneered, repeating my words. "Surely you do not really believe that you are married? Ah, so my noble-minded cousin did not think fit to tell you of the little ceremony that took place in a certain village church some three years ago, and where I was one of the witnesses. The bride was a pale, frightened little thing, not as handsome as you are, I must confess; but each to his taste. Our friend Noel was very much in love with her then, at any rate. However, in one year and three months afterward, poor thing, she and her baby were lying dead. Mark me, my fair cousin, in just one year and three months—namely, four months after your so-called marriage!"

"The scoundrel!" Conyers exclaimed, vehemently. "I do not believe a word of his story. It was a vile plot from beginning to end, invented to serve his own purposes."

"So I thought at first," said Mrs. Marchmont, drearily, "and I declared it to be impossible. He soon satisfied my doubts. He brought me a copy of the certificate. He did more. I even saw and questioned the clergyman who had married them, and the woman in whose house she died. It was, alas! only too true. Oh, how could my husband be so base?"

She covered her face with both hands, and

Conyers paced up and down the room with rapid strides, his brows knit in deep thought.

"There is something beneath all this!" he exclaimed at last. "I cannot believe that your husband could have been such a thorough-paced villain. But I interrupt you."

"I have very little more to say. The traitor had done his worst. He at first affected to commiserate me; told me that had he not been abroad at the time his cousin married me he would have interposed to prevent so great a wrong; but that the news had only reached him when it was too late, and that since his arrival in America he had kept silence for my sake."

"I would not let him see how his words had affected me; but some hours later, when all was still, the servants having gone to bed, and my husband and his cousin in the smoking-room, I unbolted one of the back doors and slipped quietly away.

"As I passed the room where the friends were, I paused for a moment, and, the door being ajar, heard my husband's voice mentioning my name. He was speaking so rapturously of me, saying how more than happy I had made him, while I all the time was drifting out of his life forever."

Her voice faltered; but it soon steadied as she continued:

"I took nothing with me but a little linen in a hand-bag and what money I had by me at the time—about fifty dollars. I left my jewelry behind me, all his presents, and kept only my wedding-ring and a locket that had been my mother's, which contained Noel's portrait."

"And you actually went away from your husband without an explanation? That was most imprudent—most indiscreet. In common justice you should have heard his version of the matter."

She looked up at him appealingly.

"I was afraid to do so. I dared not trust myself. I loved him so dearly that if he had asked me to stay I might have been weak enough to consent. Besides, what more could I learn? Surely the proofs were sufficiently convincing. No, my only safety lay in flight. By that means, too, I should spare his father. Better that the old man should think me unworthy than know that the son he was so proud of could be capable of such base conduct."

Darcy had taken up his old station by the window, his arms folded, and gazing out into vacancy, evidently following out some train of thought.

At this point he interrupted her.

"Did it never occur to you what construction might be put upon your flight—that your husband's cousin, in revenge, for example, might make his own tale good? True, you were little more than a child, and doubtless in your grief only thought of putting as many miles as possible between yourself and your home. But what did you think when you had time to view things more dispassionately?"

"I fancied my husband would guess that I had discovered his secret, and so would leave me in peace; and I was right, you see. He has never tried to find me out during eight years; or perhaps I should say, has never succeeded in doing so. But now what am I to think when I see him here in the character of Mr. Charles Temple's secretary? He evidently knows where I am, and will endeavor to see me. But that must never be. Oh, Mr. Darcy," clasping her hands imploringly, "save me—save me from myself ere it is too late!"

There was a short silence.

"Take courage," he replied at length, cheerily. "As yet, at any rate, I see no cause for alarm. Perhaps you had better stay indoors as much as possible for a few days while I consider the matter; that is all. Suppose you go and lie down now for a short time before dinner. You are looking very weary and pale. I thank you for telling me your story so candidly. Be assured your trust in me has not been misplaced, and that I will do my utmost to help you."

As soon as the door was fairly closed upon

her, Darcy walked to a cabinet, and taking out a file of papers, turned over the pages hurriedly, ran his finger down the columns of one, then paused.

"This must be it," he said to himself. "What a thing it is to have a good memory! I now have a vivid recollection of the scandal that was noised abroad eight years ago. Eight years! Is it really so long as that? The story went, I remember, that she left a doting husband, a luxurious home, and eloped with the cousin; no extenuating circumstances. Very naturally, public opinion went dead against her. Now I should like very much to know the rights of the case. Well, to-day I can do nothing; to-morrow I will have a talk with monsieur the secretary, and I shall know just about how much to confide in him. If I am right in my conjecture, what will not be his remorse at the injustice he has done this poor woman?"

CHAPTER V.

CROSS-PURPOSES.

DOLLY's thoughts must have been engrossing indeed that afternoon as she rode along.

The sharp trot with which her horse started down the avenue was allowed very soon to settle unrebuked into a very lazy walk, which also threatened to come to a standstill.

The groom, who was following at a respectful distance, regarded his young mistress's behavior with unmixed surprise. Surely there was something seriously the matter, he thought, for, as a rule, Miss Dolly was not given to strolling aimlessly along the lanes and country roads.

She was by no means a bad horsewoman, having ridden ever since she was six years old. Yet to-day she might have been the veriest tyro in the art, for all the care she took either of herself or her horse. How carelessly she was riding, the reins hanging quite loosely on Black Prince's neck! Ah, there's a stumble, and Dolly still apparently in the clouds.

The groom could put up with it no longer. He had known her from a baby. His hand to place her on the shaggy Shetland when the chubby leg would not reach the stirrup. Surely he was privileged to speak.

In another moment he was by her side.

"Excuse me, Miss Dolly; but the Prince seems very shaky on his legs to day. Hadn't you better hold up his head a bit more, and not walk him in the ruts?"

"Very well, Thomas," she answered, absent ly. "I will be careful."

And the servant fell back to his place still more dissatisfied with her manner.

"It's my belief as Miss Dolly's in love," he muttered, under his breath.

But if Dolly were in love, she at any rate did not know it, and her thoughts were tolerably prosaic ones, after all. The fact was, she was puzzling over her guardian's manner. She fancied he had become more brusque and less affectionate to her of late, and she was trying to think whether she had offended him in any way.

"I suppose I am too exacting," she said to herself, at last, "and trouble him a great deal. I must learn not to depend upon him so much. I dare say he will be marrying one of these days, and then I must do without him."

Yet the conclusion she came to did not seem to afford her much consolation.

Suddenly, the loud report of a gun sounded in a field close by, and Black Prince feeling no restraining hand on his bridle, swerved violently to one side, snorted, plunged; then, as shot after shot followed in quick succession, started into a furious gallop down the hard white road, scattering the stones to right and left.

Too late Dolly saw the result of her carelessness, and tried to snatch at the reins. Alas! they were beyond her reach; she could not even touch them; there they hung loose and

dangling, perilously near the plunging, galloping hoofs.

With something between a sob and a groan, Dolly clung to her saddle.

"He must sooner or later catch his foot in them," she cried, hysterically, "and then—oh, I am so young to die! I have never thought about death!"

Meantime, the groom hurrying to her assistance only made matters worse, for the sound of clattering feet urged on the already frightened horse.

On and on they flew, the pace never seeming to decrease. Poor Dolly's brain was dizzy; her hands stiff and swollen, still held frantically at her crutch. Her body swayed back and fore in the saddle.

"It can't last much longer now," she gasped, as she tried to close her aching eyes; "but oh! if only there were no stones to fall on, I shouldn't mind it half so much!"

But the end was not just yet. The maddened animal bounded on and on. Soon the woods and fields next to Mr. Charles Temple's estate appeared in sight; then the pretty Gothic lodge and the great iron gates.

By the lodge stood two men talking to the gatekeeper's little child. They turned at the sound of the thundering hoofs, and Dolly saw through a mist of tears that one staggered back, and flung up his arms with a gesture of despair.

It was Frank, and he had recognized her. Would he rescue her in time?

The flying reins had slipped over the horse's ears, and Dolly, as she neared the lodge, tried to shout for help; but no sound issued from her white lips.

Another moment and there was a jerk—a sudden check. Too well she knew the meaning of it, and with a last effort disengaged her foot from the stirrup, only just in time, and with a wild cry, held out both arms despairingly.

"Save me! save me!"

She was near enough to see Frank's handsome face, white with a terrible fear as he made a dash forward, when he was roughly pushed back by his companion, and she saw no more. The first time in her life, Dorothy Charteris had fainted.

When she recovered consciousness she was lying on the ground, her head supported by young Temple's shoulder, while he, pale still from fear, was looking at her with a world of devotion in his gaze, as if he had been very near losing something that was unspeakably precious to him.

"What has happened, Frank?" she asked, a little dazed still. "Am I hurt? You look so grave! And, oh! my face and hair are all covered with water!"

"To think that if it hadn't been for Noel you might have been lying on those stones, dead!" he answered, in an agitated voice. "Dolly, how can we thank him?"

Dolly shuddered at the recollection of the danger she had escaped.

"It ought to have been my hand that saved you. I could find it in my heart almost to be jealous of Noel," Frank continued. "You know, Dolly, I would lay down my life to serve you."

But she was paying no heed to his last words.

Suddenly she sprang to her feet.

"My poor horse!" she said, remorsefully. "I was forgetting him. What of him?"

"He is hurt, dear. Do not go near him now. It will pain you."

"And I was forgetting him!" she cried, again. "Oh, Frank! where is he?"

Frank silently pointed to where (at a short distance) his friend stood by the prostrate horse.

With a sharp cry she ran forward.

"Oh, my poor, poor Black Prince!" she said, bursting into tears. "Is he very much hurt? It was all my fault. I was so careless, so thoughtless! Tell me what is the matter with him? Why does he not get up?"

Noel looked gravely at the young girl, who had knelt down, and was softly patting the poor animal's neck, crying bitterly the while.

"Tell me," she repeated, gazing up into his face through her tears—"is he very much hurt?"

"I fear, Miss Charteris, the only kind thing to do will be to put him out of his misery. His leg was entangled in the rein, and is broken in two or three places. He has other and worse injuries besides. What do you say?" he inquired of the groom, who had dismounted, and was examining the poor beast.

The horse's wistful eyes were turned from one to the other, with a look of almost human intelligence.

Dolly had sunk down by his side, and had hidden her eyes.

"Yes, sir," said the groom, with a sigh, when he had finished his inspection, "you're right enough; it's all up with him; Black Prince must be shot."

And at a meaning glance from Frank, he got on his horse and galloped away.

Dolly listened to the verdict with quivering lips.

"Must it be now?"

"The sooner the better," Noel replied, sympathizingly; "the poor thing suffers."

"Come away, Dolly, dear," put in Frank, trying to draw her hand through his arm; "you can do no good here; come home with me."

"Oh, Frank!" she cried, with a sob; "he was papa's last gift to me—his very last!"

But she submitted to be led away, first putting her arms round the animal's neck, and laying her cheek against his soft nose, calling him meanwhile by every caressing name she could think of.

Noel stood with folded arms silently regarding her. How young and fair she looked as she knelt by the black horse, her bright hair streaming down her back, the large tears glistening on her cheeks!

"Will it soon be over? You won't leave him alone?" she asked him, appealingly.

He did not smile at her childish request.

"No, I will stay by him to the last," he replied, almost as if he were speaking of some dying friend of his own.

She held out her hand timidly by way of thanks, and he held it for a moment in his firm clasp.

"I have not said anything to you about saving my life," she began, nervously. "I cannot now, but you will believe me that I am not ungrateful, won't you?"

Noel blushed like a girl.

"Please say no more, Miss Charteris; you have said more than enough as it is. Besides, it was only repaying one of my many debts to Frank."

She looked at him wonderingly for a moment, then turned and walked away with young Temple. So the short walk was taken in silence.

They had just entered the gates when, in the direction of the road they had traversed, there came a sound—the firing of a gun was distinctly heard borne on the still air.

It was poor Black Prince's death-signal. He would never carry his little mistress again.

Dolly stood as if spellbound, gazing wildly at Frank, then, with a smothered moan, she drew her hand from his arm, and ran swiftly up the avenue, covering her ears as she ran, as if she would fain shut out the horrible sound.

Conyers Darcy had been growing very uneasy at the continued absence of his ward, and at last made up his mind to go in search of her. It was very unusual for Dolly to remain out so late; it was growing quite dusk.

He had scarcely descended the terrace steps when he saw the little flying figure approaching him. For a moment his heart seemed to stop beating, and he had run forward to meet her with an impetuosity utterly at variance with his usual manner.

She ran straight into his arms, as if she found her proper shelter there.

"My darling—my little Dolly!" he murmured, brokenly, as he stroked the head which lay on his breast; "don't tremble so, my pet! Tell me what has agitated you so. Quick, dear!"

What a change had taken place in the staid, matter-of-fact barrister! His very voice trembled with emotion. Was Dolly blind that she could not see the yearning love in his eyes?—did she still think that his was only a brotherly affection?

In a few words she told him of the accident which had befallen her, and of Noel's gallant rescue.

"He pulled me from poor Prince's back just before he fell, guardian. Was it not noble of him? Only think what would have happened if he had not been there!"

"Thank God, he was!" Conyers replied, raising his proud head to the dark blue skies. Recovering his wonted manner, he continued: "And so I have been very near losing my little Dolly. Child, give me your hand—let me feel that I have my little ward near me once more."

He had drawn himself suddenly upright, and was again self-possessed; but outwardly only, for try as he would, he could not resist giving the little palm an almost convulsive grasp, while his heart throbbed so loudly that "the child" must have heard its beats.

He gazed with bent brows straight before him, mentally calling himself a fool, an idiot, any name that occurred to him for being so easily betrayed into the feelings he would not for worlds have put into words. And yet it was hard, very hard, to have to stand there quietly, when all the time he would have given all—everything he possessed—fame, talents, friends, popularity (and he esteemed those things very highly)—only to clasp his darling once tight in his arms, and to hear her youthful voice calling him "love," "husband."

The thought maddened him, and with difficulty he suppressed a groan of despair.

Darcy Conyers was not a coward, but he knew that his only safety lay in flight; that to meet her day after day, to touch her hand, and look into her innocent, unsuspecting eyes without revealing the love in his own, was to him a thing utterly impossible. How could he keep up the farce of "ward and guardian"?

As Dolly related her adventure, he caught very little of the sense of what she was saying; and it was only when, in slight displeasure at his silence, she withdrew her hand from his, and would have moved from his side, that he was recalled to himself.

"I thought you would have cared," she said, half-pettishly.

"And do I not, Dolly?"

"Yes, at first," she replied, repentantly. "I didn't quite mean that, dear guardian; but confess you have not heard a dozen words, and I have been speaking for the last ten minutes. I felt sure you would be interested."

He smiled down on her.

"Just at present the fact of your safety is enough for me. Sometimes one's thoughts are too great for words. But you are in a measure right, Dolly. I believe I was attending too much to my own thoughts. I don't know when I am away how you will manage about your rides."

She locked up quickly.

"I believe I am as nervous as any woman," he continued; "and I confess I don't at all like to think of you careering over the country with no one more reliable than a groom as your companion. One experience such as you have had to-day is sufficient in a lifetime. Of course, when I am here, it is different. In future when I come down, I shall make a point of accompanying you."

He stumbled over the words, not quite knowing how to tell her of his determination of leaving her.

"I don't think I shall ever care to ride again," Dolly said, with a little shiver. "But

don't talk about it now. You are going to stay such a long time with me—us" (with a quick correction). "You promised to do so, you know."

"Don't tempt me, Dolly" (his tone was harsh and abrupt); "don't make me neglect my duty, child. I love your old home almost as much as you do yourself. Is it any pleasure to me, do you think, to leave it and go back to work and New York, as I must do tomorrow?"

"To-morrow! Oh, guardian! really?"

She spoke very dismally.

"Really, my child."

She looked for a moment rather inclined to cry. Then, as if conscious that such a proceeding would appear undignified on her part, turned away her head so that he might not see the tears that had gathered in her eyes.

"You will not miss me much, Dolly, after all; for I suppose you will be seeing a good deal of your old playmate, Temple, now that he and his mother have got back?"

"Frank Temple is not you," she replied, still with averted head.

"No; that he certainly is not!" said Darcy, a little bitterly. "He is far better-looking than I ever was; and what is more, some ten years younger."

He brought out the last word viciously, as if in that lay the sting.

"What an old fogey I must appear to you, Dolly! Let me see; I am nearly thirty-seven, and you are not eighteen. I am nearly old enough to be your father."

She did not answer.

He, too, did not speak for a moment or two; and when he did, it was in an altogether different tone.

"Dolly, are you very fond of young Temple?"

"It would be strange if I were not. He is, as you say, my only playmate."

"Yes, yes; but I mean something more than that. Forgive me, Dolly! I mean, do you care enough for him to be able to marry him one of these days?"

She turned round at this, her face a blaze of color.

"Did he depute you to ask me that question?"

Darcy clinched his fist involuntarily, but tried to speak calmly.

"No; but I have a suspicion from what he said to me yesterday that he will very soon 'demand an interview'—that is the proper phrase, is it not?"—he laughed an odd little laugh—"and I would like, not in my character of guardian, but most sincere friend, to know what answer to give him when he coolly asks for the hand and fortune of my ward."

At his laughing tone the red vanished from Dolly's cheeks as quickly as it had come.

"Would you wish me to marry him?" she asked, in a low voice.

Darcy kept his eyes fixed on the ground, as he replied, evasively:

"I think the property requires a master."

"And, possibly, you also consider that Miss Dorothy Charteris requires a master, too?"

"I—I think that very likely you would be happier married."

Try as he would, he could not bring out the words smoothly.

"You want a protector; a—a—in short, your position is a very trying one, a young girl—an heiress—alone. If you really and truly love the man—"

He blurted and stammered over the disjointed sentences, feeling thoroughly ashamed of his weakness. But Dolly, apparently, discovered nothing strange in his manner; she was looking thoughtfully into space.

When he had finished speaking, a curious look came into her eyes.

"I see how it is," she said, at length, in rather a hard voice; "you want to get rid of

me and of your trust. I will not disappoint your hopes, for I dare say you have for some time thought me capricious—unreasonable—a trouble."

"Dolly, what do you mean?"

She mistook the pain in his voice for anger, and her whole manner changed.

"I mean this," she cried, without one quiver in her voice, "that when Frank comes to you, you may tell him that I will marry him as soon as he likes!" Her voice faltered for one moment, but soon steadied, and she repeated the words more firmly—"As soon as he likes!"

Conyers Darcy bowed his head, to show that he heard her, but did not speak; and in good truth could not if he had wished, for his brain seemed on fire.

She was irritated at his silence, and felt now that she was sure of what before she had only guessed—namely, that he looked upon her in the light of an incumbrance.

"I suppose your guardianship will soon be at an end now, so I shall not require to ask you for many more favors," she continued, passionately; "but oblige me in this, please. Do not speak to me on this matter any oftener than you can help. Don't bother me about it; only hurry the—the marriage on. I am tired of Charteris—tired of my own society—tired of everything."

With which burst of eloquence she ran into the house without even glancing at him.

Darcy remained where he was until she had disappeared within doors; then staggering rather than walking away, hid his face in his hands.

When he removed them, his dark cheeks were wet with tears.

CHAPTER VI.

A HEAVY BLOW.

BREAKFAST was just over at Charteris Park, and Mr. Darcy had gone to the library with his batch of letters to read, and if needs be answer them uninterrupted; while Dolly, the only occupant of the breakfast-room, leaned languidly against the half-open window, idly watching a gardener as he cleared away the dead leaves and clipped off the imperfect blossoms from a few late rose-trees in the small circular rose-bed.

It was a glorious morning. There seemed scarcely a breath of wind, and the sky was as blue and clear as in midsummer. Overhead a colony of crows were winding their way to their home in the oak-trees, breaking the silence with their monotonous "caw, caw!"

Poor Dolly was in a bad humor that morning, both with herself and every one else. Her guardian had been cold and stern during breakfast, never glancing in her direction, but devoting himself with peculiar intensity to the columns of his newspaper, over which he pored as he slowly sipped his coffee.

When Mrs. Marchmont had at last vanished into the housekeeper's room, there to discuss the weighty matter of dinner, she quite expected her guardian would have made some reference to the preceding day's conversation, but he did no such thing. He deliberately finished the last bit of toast on his plate, the last drop in his cup, his eyes still fixed on the paper. Then pushing both from him, took up the goodly pile of letters by his side, and rose from his chair.

Dolly watched him furtively. Was he going to speak at last? No. He walked to the door, hesitated for a moment with the knob in his hand, and finally closed it behind him.

She could have stamped with disappointment. Somehow, she felt she would have given a great deal to have him look and speak kindly to her as usual, and yet she was not wont to care so much. It must be because he was on the point of going away, she argued; and she always liked parting friends with any one, no matter how disagreeable he or she may have been.

The sound of his returning footsteps made her give a hasty rub to her eyes with her

handkerchief, for she had been quietly wiping away a tear or two. But when he entered she was composed enough.

He had separated one letter from the bundle. He still held in his hand the envelope unfastened.

"Our last night's conversation was most *à propos*," he said, dryly. "As I expected, to-day's post brings me a note from young Temple. He writes in an honorable, straightforward manner, and I am quite satisfied with all he proposes. Still, I have brought his letter here, in case you might like to see it before I answer it."

"Thank you; but I do not wish to."

"Then you have not changed your mind, as is the manner of young ladies?"

"Certainly not."

His face grew hot at the studied coldness of her words, and he held the letter, hesitatingly turning it over and over.

"Then all there remains for me is to wish you every happiness with the man of your choice."

"Thank you."

"Dolly," he burst out, impetuously, "I can't make out what you really do mean in all this! It is not too late for you to retract what you said yesterday, if you wish to, and no one will be the wiser."

"But I do not wish to retract," said Dolly, defiantly, while a lump seemed rising in her throat which threatened to choke her.

"Would the man never cease torturing her?" she thought.

He lingered yet one moment, as if unwilling to give up even the faintest shadow of hope.

"Then in that case I must go and put an end to the happy lover's suspense."

He waited for an answer, but none came.

As he quitted the room, Dolly attempted a few bars of a lively song. The effort to do so was great, but she accomplished it, and it was only when she heard the library door shut with a sudden bang that the song very abruptly ended in a sob.

This, then, was the reason that she felt so bad-tempered and miserable as she stood by the window and looked with savage eyes up into the peaceful, unclouded heavens, and watched the birds whirling and circling in the air.

Meanwhile, wending its way up the long carriage-drive, though as yet only dimly discernible in the distance, a vehicle was approaching, the occupants of which were to make a considerable difference in Dolly's future career. It was a shabby enough conveyance, drawn by a couple of lean, fly-bitten horses. In fact, it was no other than the hack from the "Mansion," the one hotel in the village; so the travelers, whoever they might be, must have come by train.

Nearer and nearer came the carriage, now hidden by the trees, now emerging into the open, until, rapidly skirting the terrace, it came at last to a stand-still by the wide flight of stone steps.

Long ere this, however, Dolly's gaze had come to earth again, and shrouded by the curtains, herself unseen, she was eagerly watching the proceedings with an air of the greatest curiosity.

The driver, having descended from his seat, woke the echoes by a tremendous peal on the knocker, then threw open the carriage door, and stood ready to assist its occupants to alight.

The first to do so was a tall, black-eyed woman, whose age might have been anything from thirty to fifty, and who at one time might have possessed some beauty, for the remains of it were still apparent, though the ravages of care and trouble had done their work; yet the eyes were still bright and the hair was glossy and abundant.

By the hand she held a little boy—presumably her son, for he had the same dark, long-lashed eyes and small, straight features. The child was fantastically dressed in a blue velvet suit, very shabby and dusty, much over-trim-

med with tarnished gold buttons and mock-white lace.

His little tasseled cap was pushed back from his thick curls, and he looked wonderingly round as he ascended the steps.

Dolly mechanically watched the unloading of several trunks and the final departure of the hack, its coachman apparently regarding the money he had received with an eye of disfavor; and then turning round, for the first time became aware of the presence of a servant, who was waiting with a salver in his hand, on which lay a card.

"I have shown them into the small drawing-room, ma'am," he said, dubiously, but at the same time with a twinkle of curiosity in his face; "and I should like to know, ma'am, if you please, what's to be done with the baggage. John Smith, of the 'Mansion House,' has brought them all in, and they are lumbering up the hall."

"I don't know—I don't understand," his mistress replied, bewildered. "I suppose they must stay where they are for the present. It must be some mistake. I will see Mr. Darcy about it."

"And there is a great, savage-looking dog, ma'am; I daren't go near it," the man pursued.

But Dolly did not hear him for she was reading the name on the card.

"Mrs. Vane Charteris" was inscribed thereon in small, distinct characters.

"Vane Charteris!" Dolly repeated to herself in astonishment. "Why, that was papa's name! Can this be some relation of his that he has never told me of?"

There was a sinking at her heart—a presentiment of coming evil stealing over her, she knew not why, as she slowly made her way to the library.

She entered the room so quietly that Conyers Darcy never heard her. He was sitting by the table, his head resting on his folded arms. His face was hidden, and there was an air of utter dejection about his whole attitude.

Dolly stood for a moment hesitating whether to advance or retire; but at last laid her hand lightly on his shoulder.

At the touch he started up, and laughed uneasily.

"What, caught napping, am I?" You won't believe in my stress of work again, Dolly. But you look troubled; what is it?"

Dolly held out the card.

"Some people have just come here with a lot of trunks, from the station, I fancy, and they are in the little drawing-room. I don't know what to do."

Darcy read the name, then looked up brightly.

"And you are worrying your brain about this Mrs. Vane Charteris, whoever she may be? Why, child, you have got so out of the way of entertaining visitors, that you want me to come and help you, is that all? Well, come along, she may turn out to be some twentieth cousin of yours, who has found you out after many weary years of hopeless search, and who longs to embrace you."

Having succeeded in making her smile, he gave her his arm and led her away.

As they passed through the hall he came to a stand-still, and looked with a comical expression at the huge pile of baggage which lay scattered around.

"Seems, Dolly, as if our cousin intended honoring us with a long visit, without waiting for an invitation."

Mrs. Vane Charteris rose from her seat on one of the couches as the two entered, and performed a most elaborate courtesy.

"Miss Charteris, I presume?" she began.

"My late dear husband's daughter."

"I am Miss Charteris, certainly," bewildered Dolly replied; "but—"

She was unceremoniously interrupted by the new-comer, who pushed forward the little boy.

"Ray my dear, go and kiss your sister. He was named Raymond after his father," she explained. "My husband's name, as doubt-

less you are aware, was Vane Raymond Charteris."

Dolly looked with terrified eyes at Darcy, who pressed her little hand reassuringly, then turned to the speaker.

"A truce to this farce, madam!" he said, sternly. "Have the goodness to explain who you are, and the cause of your visit here?"

The lady put up her eyeglass, and examined him intently when he had finished speaking.

"Who is that gentleman?" she inquired of Dolly. "You have not mentioned his name."

"He is Mr. Darcy, my guardian."

"Oh, your guardian! That makes a difference, of course. Then, sir, I suppose you have a right to receive an answer to your questions. In the first place I am the wife, or, I should say, widow, of Mr. Vane Charteris, this young lady's father. We were married in Italy, eight years ago. In the second place I have come here to claim my son's inheritance, and to manage the property for him until he is of age."

"You, of course, have ample proofs whereby to substantiate your claim?" said Darcy, calmly.

"Oh, yes, of course," the visitor acquiesced glibly. "Certificate of my marriage—of Ray's birth, my husband's last will—everything, I believe. I think I have left nothing behind; they are all safe in this box"—touching a small, brass-bound one by her side. "I should have been here before; but, to tell you candidly, my husband and I didn't get on very well together. Vane was shockingly bad-tempered, you know, and so close, would you believe it, he never even told me of his first marriage! There were no other children—no sons, I believe?"

This, as if the possibility had only then occurred to her.

Darcy shook his head, and looked pityingly at Dolly, who was sitting half-stunned in her chair. Somehow, in spite of himself, he half-believed the woman's story. He knew something of Vane Charteris's character, but he had studiously hidden the dark side of it from his daughter, who had looked upon her father as something more approaching a god than a man.

"Had he been foolish in acting so?" he asked himself. "Ah, it almost seemed so. How plain everything appeared now! How well he remembered those long trips abroad, and how reticent Charteris had always been about his doings there! Then the death-bed. Yes, he could understand the dying father's anxiety about his daughter's future; his wish for her marriage with him, Conyers Darcy, to secure a home and protection for her, while still anxious for his son to inherit the greater portion of his property. His eyes were indeed opened, but too late.

"Well," continued the woman, "I quite accidentally heard of poor Vane's death but three months—no, thirteen weeks ago; just when I had actually been calling the poor dear man all sorts of hard names, for having, as I thought, deserted his wife and child, not knowing that he had been for three long years in his grave."

"And may I ask how you discovered that your husband and my ward's father were one and the same man?" Darcy demanded.

"Oh, do you doubt that? I didn't do it all myself, I can tell you. The similarity of the names struck me in the first place, besides one or two other things which made me suspect; so I employed a lawyer from Florence, and he very soon ferreted out the whole matter. We lived about fifteen miles from Florence; a little village it was, very small and uninteresting. I dare say that was why Vane chose it; no strangers ever cared to visit it; it was so out of the way. But I am not an Italian, though I am so dark. No, my father was as American as that girl there,"—pointing at Dolly.

"I am a lawyer," began Darcy, with some hesitation; "you say you have papers and certificates with you. Will you allow me to see them?"

The woman laughed cunningly.

"A lawyer? Well, I don't know if I may trust you with them; I don't know what you mightn't do; but there's no fire in this room, that's one good thing!"

He flushed hotly at her words.

"Madam, you forget that I am a gentleman!" he said, sternly.

She looked up naively.

"Ah, but I know nothing about you, do I? You are quite a stranger to me, and of course look upon me as an impostor. Now, come, don't look so savage; perhaps I may let you have a glimpse at them after all."

There was so much sense in her words, and she so evidently did not mean to be insulting, that there was nothing more to be said; so he waited with an ill-concealed impatience whilst she took a small key from her chatelaine and proceeded to unlock the precious box.

Meanwhile little Ray had approached Dolly's side, and ventured to touch her fingers.

"Please may I have Pablo, my dog, in?" he asked, looking shyly up through his long lashes. "The man who opened the door was afraid of him and shut him out. Indeed, he is very quiet; he will seem so strange there by himself, and might get lost."

The little fellow's lips were quivering, but he was too manly to cry. Dolly mechanically rung the bell, and desired that the dog should be admitted. The door was thrown violently open, and a huge, tawny-colored animal bounded in, almost overturning his little master, who had rushed forward in an ecstasy of delight to meet him.

At the word of command he obediently crouched down, and resting his muzzle upon his forepaws, gazed lovingly into little Ray's face, giving heavy thuds on the floor with his bushy tail the while.

The child climbed up into Dolly's lap, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for him to be there, and sat quietly, his little hands folded on his knees.

"I like you very much," he said, condescendingly, "and Pablo will soon like you, too; for we always like the same people, me and Pablo." Then more confidentially, "Mamma says I am always going to live in this big house, so if you live here too you shall take me for walks, and we will run races on the grass. It's a much nicer house than where I used to live."

Mrs. Vane Charteris looked across to where the pair were sitting.

"Just see those two," she said, speaking with a letter between her teeth, as she paused in her occupation of turning over the contents of the box. "Just look at them!—what a likeness! Why, they are as like as two peas! You won't doubt their relationship now, sir?"

Darcy looked in the direction in which she pointed, and almost started as he saw how true her words were.

Though little Ray had his mother's dark eyes and jetty curls, and Dolly's hair was bright chestnut, yet the whole expression was so alike in both that one seemed but a reflection of the other.

The woman laughed, not ill-naturedly, for she saw how Darcy involuntarily caught his breath.

"Now you may have a look at these papers," she continued, "and there is the last portrait I ever had of my husband, though you won't want that now, I fancy. I have heaps of his letters somewhere, but here are two or three that will do for the present. One begins, 'My dear wife,' you see, and ends, 'Your ever loving husband'—not much of the *ever* loving, by the way; and there's what your eyes have been hankering after—the certificates."

"These are copies."

"Oh yes," she replied, easily; "Felippo—that's the lawyer I told you of—has the originals. He said he wouldn't trust me with those. Well, sir, is all correct? You are a lawyer, so ought to know."

"My opinion cannot carry much weight," he replied, evasively. "Of course we shall dispute your claim to the uttermost. My

ward will, I am sure, leave everything in my hands, and I shall do my utmost in her interest, you may be sure."

"Yes; so Felippo said," she answered, thoughtfully. "He is in New York. He said there would have to be a trial; but I think it's a pity to spend a lot of money on the matter. It must be so clear to every one that Ray is the heir by will to almost the entire property."

He made no reply to that; but, returning her the papers and the photograph, resumed his place at Dolly's side.

"Put down that boy, and come with me," he said, in a low voice. "I must speak to you alone." Then, to the widow, "Miss Charteris is naturally a little agitated at this interview, and—"

"Yes, yes!" interposed the latter, cheerily; "of course you will want to have a chat over it. Poor young thing! it seems very hard upon her; but she shall never want a home while I can give her one. We'll be friends in time, I promise you. There! never mind me. I've been traveling the best part of the night, and am not sorry for the rest."

Dolly followed Darcy into the library without a word being spoken by either.

When he had carefully shut the door, he turned and, taking both her hands in his, looked full at her. Her face was very pale, but quite composed.

"Con, is it true?"

She had not called him "Con" since she was a child, and her doing so now in her trouble, touched him greatly.

"Yes, dear; I fear it is."

"And I shall have to give up Charteris? It is mine no longer?"

"If this person's tale is true, you must, Dolly; but you will have your share of your father's property."

"Did you see how like papa Ray was? He had his exact smile. I noticed it at once."

"I saw the resemblance—yes."

"Con, if the papers are right, and I feel sure they are, I wouldn't like it to come to law. I would rather let them have Charteris, and go quietly away somewhere."

"Yes, Dolly; I think it would be wise. It will not do for us to spend more money than we can help. But there is time enough to decide all this again. Oh, Dolly, how I wish I could help you in this! How I wish I could bear it for you!"

"Only last night I said I was tired of Charteris," she said, in a low voice. "Is this a judgment for my foolish words?"

"Do not think of it, dear. You were excited last night. You did not know what you were saying."

"Did I not?" she replied, with a frank smile. "No; I did not. You are right. Ah, well! my pride and sad temper have met with a severe punishment."

"Will the loss of Charteris quite break your heart?" he asked, with a most tender inflection in his tones.

She tried to meet his gaze bravely as she shook her head; but the next moment hid her face in his coat-sleeve and burst into tears.

He let her cry quietly, knowing that tears would prove a greater relief than any words of his, and in a very few minutes she was able to look up and speak calmly.

"Have you written to Frank Temple yet?"

"No; not yet."

"Ah! that is right." And she gave a sigh of relief. "I am glad of that!"

"Dolly, you are not going to give Frank up because of this? You are not going to imagine that he is mercenary; that he does not love you a thousand times beyond any wealth you may bring him? You are unjust to him. It is not right. You who have known him all your life ought not to give him credit for such base motives."

He pleaded for his rival with a warmth that surprised himself. He truly believed that she loved Frank, and was now sacrificing herself to a mistaken notion of honor.

Dolly shivered a little as she heard him

pleading young Temple's cause; but she was determined to be brave then, come what might.

"I will confess," she said, at last, her head bent very low, "I never meant one word of what I said. I was going to do Frank a great wrong; for if this woman had not come, if all this had never happened, I should have married him without one spark of love for him. You will despise me, I know, but I can't help it. I never cared for him, except as a friend or brother."

"Then what made you speak as you did?"

She colored vividly.

"I believe it was partly your fault. You were cross with me, and I thought you wanted to get rid of me, so I said the first thing that came into my head."

He bit his lip.

"You had a narrow escape, Dolly. A life with a man you only 'liked' would have been a miserable one."

"I know it," she said, penitently; "and don't scold me, Con. You know what hard work it was for me even as a child to own myself in the wrong."

He smiled at her tone, for he could well afford to do so.

"And now I must write and give poor Frank his *conge*," he said, in a more cheerful voice than he ought under the circumstances to have used. "Dolly, I am sorry for the lad."

"I am not!" she replied, brightly. "Frank is only a boy. I dare say he hardly knows his own mind; but being fond of me in a sisterly sort of way, he takes it for granted that he must be in love with me." She paused a moment; then more soberly she continued: "Don't say anything about the change that has taken place in my fortunes. I wouldn't like him to think that I had refused him because I am not so well off, for I am sure he does not care about my money; so let him imagine that his answer was sent before these people came, will you?"

"You are right, my child, as you always are."

He took up a pen, and drew a sheet of paper toward him.

Dolly was standing thoughtfully by the window, her hands loosely clasped together.

"Though all this seems so hard to bear now, Dolly, yet perhaps in time you may learn to look upon it in a different light."

"It will not be a hard task to learn to love my little brother; but oh, Con!" (in a piteous tone) "to think that I should have a brother!"

He knew to what she alluded, and did not reply; only gazed lovingly at her.

"If only papa had but told me before he died!" she said, with a sob in her voice.

That was the first and last time she ever referred to her father's conduct.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

WHILE Mr. Darcy and Dolly were receiving their unexpected visitors, Mrs. Marchmont, knowing she would not be missed, ventured out into the grounds in the hope not only that the cool fresh air would drive away her headache, but also that she might think out her own sad thoughts in solitude.

For the first time through so many long years she was perplexed, uneasy as to whether she had really done a wise thing in running away from her husband in the way she had without first seeing him and demanding an explanation.

All night long she had tossed and turned, her brain in a whirl, as she viewed her conduct in that light, and the morning had dawned without affording her any relief.

As soon as breakfast was over, she had slipped away through a garden door, and, following a path which led to the shrubbery, hastened with nimble feet in that direction.

There she paced backward and forward, her hands clasped loosely together, her head erect, with eyes gazing straight ahead, and somehow, in spite of all, with a strange feeling of something almost approaching pleasure mingling

with her pain in the thought that she was so near her husband; that they were breathing the same air; that perhaps not half a mile separated them.

With a sudden catching of her breath, she all at once formed the idea of seeing him. Yes, she felt that she must; but she would be very cautious, very careful. Just once, for one moment, she would see him, nothing more! She would just stand, herself unseen, and give one look, one long look, into his face, and he need never know how near she had been—she, his sometime wife, who once had loved him so; nay, who loved him so devotedly, so passionately still—who loved him a thousand times better than life itself!

Having decided upon taking that step, Mrs. Marchmont's impulsive nature could brook no delay until she had accomplished her desire, and she immediately began to consider how best to attain her object.

Presently, the sound of footsteps, and eager, animated voices, approaching in her direction, made her give one glance, and, with a suppressed cry, step hastily aside and crouch down among some tall ferns and wide-spreading shrubs.

In that one quick look she had recognized the only person in the world who had power to send the hot blood in a torrent to her cheeks, to make her heart beat so violently that she could hear its throbs—the man whom she had dreamed of, thought of almost daily, for the past eight years.

Nearer and nearer they came, Frank Temple and his friend, until they halted not half a dozen paces from her hiding-place.

Frank's handsome face wore a look of anxiety very foreign to it, and he seemed moody and abstracted.

"It's all very well your talking," he said, evidently in answer to a remark from his companion; "but I think I ought to have heard before this. I told him to let me know my fate at once; and it's eleven o'clock now," consulting his watch.

"Poor, long-suffering watch!" the other replied. "I wonder how many times you have looked at it in the quarter of an hour it has taken us to walk here."

Frank laughed a little foolishly.

"My dear Noel, it was very evident that you have never been in love, or you wouldn't be so dreadfully matter-of-fact if you had."

Noel made no reply, only drew a long, deep breath.

"What an uncommunicative fellow you are!" young Temple continued, throwing an arm affectionately over his friend's shoulder. "Here I keep you into the small hours of the night, talking about my hopes and fears, my love for Dolly, and I don't know what besides, and you sit and listen to me so patiently and uncomplainingly, like the dear old boy you are, for all the world as if, instead of boring, I were interesting you immensely. Noel, I would give a great deal to know if you were ever in love."

"Yes; I was once in love, as you call it," he replied, bringing out the words in jerks. "I was once—a fool!"

Frank took the implied reprimand in good part.

"And what was she like?—and how was it matters didn't turn out all right between you?"

"Because she was as worthless a creature as ever trod this earth!" Noel burst out, passionately. "Because, though she had the face of an angel, she had the heart of a devil!"

"I am very, very sorry for you!" said Frank, sympathetically. "Hallo! what's that in the bushes? I thought I heard a rustling. Awfully sorry! I should like to hear more about it, Noel, if you don't mind. I can't think what the woman must have been like who could play fast and loose with a dear old fellow like you."

A bitter smile curled the corners of Noel's mouth.

"She ruined my life, boy; she well-nigh broke my heart! It was because of the shame

she brought upon my name and home that I renounced them!"

A wild, piercing scream interrupted him, and Mrs. Marchmont, white as death, and shaking as if with an ague, broke through the intervening shrubs, and threw herself at the speaker's feet.

"Unsay those words, Noel, unsay those words!" she cried, in an agonized tone. "Do not say that I broke your heart—that I ruined your life!"

Noel drew back a pace or two from the abject figure before him, and looked with utter surprise and some pity, but with no trace of recognition visible in his eyes.

It was, he thought, some poor creature who had lost her reason, perhaps through grief; for he noticed the widow's cap, and Frank's exclamation of "Mrs. Marchmont!" made him turn to him for a solution of the mystery.

"She is Dolly's companion; I can't understand it. She must be ill!" Frank said, in utter perplexity. "I have never known her like this before."

The woman, who had hitherto covered her face with her hands, removed them at his words, and revealed her features to Noel.

"Good God! Cecil!" he exclaimed, recoiling from her in horror. "I hoped—I believed you were dead ere this!"

Young Temple gave one quick, comprehensive glance from one to the other, then conscious that his presence was not required, stole silently away.

For one brief moment the two remained gazing into each other's faces—a moment which seemed to both an eternity of time; then Noel stooped and took her wrists in his iron grasp.

"So he is dead, I presume, since I find you with that mockery on your head: or has he added to his crimes by deserting you? Yet, why should I blame him?—why expect him to be faithful to you for eight years? You could not be true to me for two!"

She never took her eyes from his face.

"I don't know what you mean," she said, slowly, "nor to whom you refer."

"Do not trifle with me!" he cried, sternly. "You know well enough whom I mean. Charles Thornhill, my cousin, the base traitor, for whose sake you left your husband—your home!"

At his words she wrenched herself free from him, and sprung to her feet, her face pale no longer, but ablaze with indignation.

"Who told you that lie—that wicked lie? Who told you that I left my home with him?"

He saw the scorn visible in every feature, but he only looked upon it as a piece of clever acting—no more.

"Your own words," he returned—"the letter that was found in your room told me the truth. I can speak of it calmly enough now, can I not? Perhaps you wonder a little that I can do so? But can you picture my feelings when I read the words in which you actually boasted of your love for that villain?" He clinched his hands suddenly together and set his teeth hard. "Ah, I cannot bear to think of it even now, after eight years. It would have been kinder to have killed me outright than written that letter, Cecil!"

He turned away his head, that she might not see the emotion plainly visible in his features.

But she was not looking in his direction; she stood as if turned to stone, her hands clasped over her heart, her breath coming in gasps, waiting for his words. What was she to hear next!

She had not to wait long. Presently he spoke again, his voice hard and cold as before.

"I do not know whether you ever heard the sequel to that night's work. In case you have not, I will tell it you. Three days after your flight, my father, whose pride and joy you once were, my dear, loving old father died, of heart disease, the doctors said. But I knew better—I, who stood by his bedside and heard your name mingled with cries for vengeance,

knew that his proud heart was broken; it was the shame your conduct had brought upon his name that killed him—not disease!"

A moan issued from Cecil's pallid lips, and she shivered as if the air were chill, though the sun was shining straight down on her uncovered head.

"What! has that power to wound you?" he asked, with a bitter laugh. "Then you have not become utterly hardened—"

For answer she raised her agonized face.

"Noel, spare me! Have you no mercy?"

"Do you wish to hear more?" he said, abruptly—"to hear how I left the country and wandered abroad for five years, trying by hard work to banish thought and memory, and how at last, returning to America, work failed, and starvation stared me in the face? If it had not been for Frank Temple I should soon have filled a pauper's coffin. A strange thing would it not have been? But who would have cared?

He paused, breathing heavily.

"Go on," said Cecil, scarcely above a whisper; "nothing can hurt me now."

"What more have I to tell?" he exclaimed, half angrily. "Have you not heard enough?"

"No. I—I want to hear about the letter you spoke of—what the words were."

He looked at her curiously.

"You want to know what your own words were. You have soon forgotten them, then! I should have thought that they would have burned into your very soul."

She passed her hand in a dazed way across her eyes.

"Will you speak to me as if I knew nothing of it at all?"—her voice was weak and hesitating—"as if you were speaking of a stranger, not of me? Will you tell me all that took place after she, your wife, went away?"

"If you wish it, yes."

Something in her voice made him turn toward her. She had sunk down in a heap on the grass, and was trembling from head to foot, and for the first time there was some pity in his gaze.

"You are ill," he said, more gently. "After all, what good does this do, bringing back the past? Let us leave it alone. In less than one short hour we shall have separated forever on this earth."

She interrupted him.

"It is too late to speak of that. You must tell me all now. I claim it as a right. But, oh! when you talk of her, your wife, do not be too hard on her. There may be much to pity, after all. What if she were only weak, not sinful?"

He put out his hand impulsively; then suddenly checked himself with a sigh.

"You are not much changed," he said, after a short pause; "a little older, a little sadder." Then, abruptly, "Has life been hard to you, too, Cecil?"

"We will not discuss my life now," she cried, impatiently. "Surely that could have no interest for you? But tell me of the—the letter."

He looked searchingly into her face before replying:

"True; I promised to tell you about the letter. Well, I will do so in as few words as possible. The night before you left my house, Thornhill and I stayed up smoking so long that, being late, I would not disturb you; so slept in my dressing-room. Upon coming down to breakfast the next morning I found both wife and cousin gone. It was about eleven o'clock when your maid brought me the letter which, she said, you had directed her to give me. But you must have been gone many hours before that."

"You are right," she answered, dreamily—"I had put many miles between my home and me before daybreak."

He started, and bit his lip.

"You did not leave the house together, then?"

She said nothing, only raised her head and looked him full in the face with eyes that never wavered and with an expression in

them that seemed to make his heart stand still.

"Good heavens, Cecil! would you have me believe you innocent?" he cried. "What does that look mean?"

But she only smiled a pitiful little smile.

He gave a deep sigh that was almost a groan; then, taking from a pocket-book a torn, faded scrap of paper, which had evidently been read and re-read a number of times, handed it to her.

She shook her head.

"Read it to me. I—I am faint. I could not see the words."

He complied after a moment's hesitation.

She heard him read it to the end, interrupting him neither by word nor gesture.

It was very short, and ran thus:

"I thought I loved you until Mr. Thorndyke came here, and then I found out how mistaken I had been, and how different the feeling I had for you was to the all-absorbing love I feel for him. I do not ask you to forgive me for the step I am about to take. As soon as you obtain a divorce we shall be married. Until then, I ask you not to look for me—to leave me in peace. It is my last request to you. Adieu, Noel! Forget me as soon as you can; it is the wisest thing to do."

When he had finished reading, Cecil held out her hand for the letter. She looked at it very earnestly for some moments, closely examining every word.

"It is very like," she said softly—"very like; and it ends with the little flourish that you used to laugh at me for putting. It is so like, that I ought not to wonder at your being deceived; but, Noel, it is a forgery!"

"Forgery!" he echoed, suddenly stooping, and seizing her hand. "Do you, then, deny that you wrote that letter?"

"I don't know that it matters much now," she answered, faintly. "Nothing can affect me now. But still, Noel, I do deny it—I never saw that letter before."

"You will swear this?" he asked, in a choking voice.

She raised herself with difficulty to her knees, and put her hands together, as if in prayer.

"As there is a heaven above us, I swear it!"

"Then may Heaven forgive me!" he cried, throwing up his arms; "you never can!"

"I begin to see it all now," she said, dreamily, as if speaking to herself. "His revenge was very, very cruel."

Noel turned round at her words, his face as white as death, and great drops of perspiration standing on his forehead.

"I, too, begin to have my eyes opened,"—trying to speak calmly. "Cecil, I feel, I know, you are innocent, now, when it is too late to hope for forgiveness. But before we part, tell me the truth—tell me why you left me; let me know the full extent of his villainy—for, if he be still on earth, one day I shall meet him."

She opened her mouth as if to speak, but no words came. She saw his face as if in a vision. A mist came before her eyes, and with a gasping cry she fell forward. But it was into Noel's arms she fell, against his breast her wan cheek rested. When he laid her gently back on the soft turf, he saw she was in a deathlike swoon.

CHAPTER VIII. RECONCILIATION.

THE hall door of Charteris Park stood wide open, and Dolly was coming slowly down the wide staircase when Noel appeared with the insensible figure in his arms.

She ran forward, with an exclamation of dismay.

"What has happened?" she said, in alarm, Noel's haggard face and disturbed manner filling her with dismay. "Is—is she dead?"

"No, she has only fainted," he answered, briefly. "A doctor must be sent for at once, Miss Charteris. This is no time for explanations. But I may tell you that she is my wife, and that we have not met for eight years. Now show me, please, where I am to take her."

Dolly was a sensible girl; so, waiting for nothing further, gave him one sympathetic glance, and hurriedly led the way to Mrs. Marchmont's own room.

There Noel tenderly laid his wife on the bed, smoothing back her ruffled hair with a touch as gentle as a girl's; and as Dolly left the room in search of brandy and other restoratives, she saw him softly press his lips to the cold cheek, and heard the murmured words:

"For this once, my darling, for the last time!"

In a few minutes Doctor Briars was seen speeding up the avenue in his phaeton; but it was some time ere that skillful little man was able to bring poor Cecil back to consciousness.

"She has had a very severe shock," he said, in answer to Dolly's inquiries, "and I fear for the brain; still, we shall see—we shall see."

Noel was pacing up and down the passage in an agony of despair, the suspense seeming intolerable. At last, Dolly came out to him, and he went quickly forward to meet her, his eyes asking the question his lips could not form.

"She is much better," she began, and stopped and looked puzzled, "but she will not see you. I tried to persuade her to do so, but she seemed so much distressed that I hadn't the heart to trouble her any more. She keeps on saying, 'Let him see Mr. Darcy. He will tell him all.'"

"Who is Mr. Darcy?"

"He is staying in the house. I will send him to you."

She set off running, but returned in a moment, holding out her hand impulsively.

"I am so very, very sorry for you! I don't understand what is wrong between you and your wife, but I see you are both in trouble, and I do so hope you will soon be happy once more! She is my dearest friend, and you only yesterday saved me from a horrible death. I wish it were in my power to help you!"

He touched the outstretched hand gratefully.

"Thank you, Miss Charteris; you are very kind. I thank you for your good wishes, which will, I fear, never be realized. One thing you can do if you will. I shall be leaving this place as soon as I hear that my poor wife is well again; but when I am gone, be good to her, and I will forever bless you!"

He could not trust himself to say more, but turned his head quickly away, lest she should see the hot tears that had sprung to his eyes.

Presently Mr. Darcy joined him in the corridor.

His manner was exceedingly cold and formal, notwithstanding that he could not help feeling sorry for the man, he looked so utterly miserable and wretched.

Curly desiring him to follow, he led the way to the library, and there the two remained, with shut doors, in deep conversation for some hours.

Dolly, meanwhile, having looked into the sick-room, and seen that her patient had fallen into a heavy sleep, from the effects of an opiate administered by the doctor, descended to the little drawing-room, where Mrs. Vane Charteris entertained her with long conversations about her former life, interspersed with expressions of pity for the sufferer up stairs.

As soon as the widow found she was not likely to meet with any opposition if her claims were proved to be just, she showed herself to be, what she really was, a thoroughly good-natured, though somewhat vulgar woman.

"I don't think we had better stay in the house now there's illness in it, my dear," she said once. "I know what the extra trouble is. We will just get rooms at the hotel for a few days, until we see what happens."

But Dolly would not hear of such a proceeding.

"No; you shall stay here, at any rate, as my guests, if you will. Perhaps by-and-by it will be my turn to accept your hospitality."

Mrs. Vane came forward, and placed both hands on the girl's slender shoulders.

"Now that's what I call really good-natured. I shouldn't have dared ask you to stay if you hadn't mentioned it yourself. My dear, it would please me if you were to live here altogether. Ray has taken such a fancy to you already. We should feel dreadfully lonesome in this grand house all by ourselves. I don't mind telling you I've not been accustomed to such fine things. I declare I sha'n't like having to order the servants about or anything. You could put me in the way of things a bit. Ray, child, put your arms round your sister's neck, and beg her to live with us until, at any rate, that tall, dark gentleman—I forgot his name—carries her away to a home of her own."

Dolly flushed crimson.

"I am not going to marry Mr. Darcy, if that is what you mean!" she said, proudly.

Mrs. Vane smiled knowingly.

"I meant no offense, dear; but I have eyes, and I can't help seeing with them; and though he was so sharp with me, and seemed to look right through me with those eyes of his, yet I bear him no malice for that; it was quite natural. But there! we'll change the subject. You've promised, or as good as promised, not to run away in a hurry; so that will have to do for the present. Now, if that poor lady is well enough to be left, I would like to go over the gardens a bit, if you wouldn't mind showing them to me."

"You'll be sorry to leave Charteris, and give it up to strangers," she said, as they slowly returned to the house. "And, indeed, if it weren't for Ray, I should almost be inclined to go straight back to Italy and say no more about it. You are suited to the place, and I am not—it's a fact! But there! whatever I might do, I can't answer for Ray when he grows a man."

Dolly could not help smiling at her naivete, but was quick to appreciate the real good feeling that was perceptible through all the bluntness.

"I do not deny that I shall feel leaving Charteris very deeply," she said, frankly; "but if it belongs to my brother, it is only right that he should have it, and I would rather give it up to little Ray than to any one else."

Which speech charmed Mrs. Vane so much that she had to stop and give her a hearty kiss on both cheeks.

"Some one will have a prize one of these days!" she said, oracularly.

The last rays of the setting sun were fading slowly away in the western sky ere Noel's conference with Mr. Darcy came to an end, and the library, which but a few moments ago had been flooded with crimson light, was dull and cold once more.

The two men had risen from their chairs, and were standing near the window. Noel was gazing thoughtfully into space, his arms folded across his chest, his lips pressed tightly together.

"And what do you intend to do now?"

It was Mr. Darcy who broke the silence, which was threatening to become oppressive.

"I scarcely know what course I ought to pursue," the other said, hesitating a little. "I suppose I ought to go away without seeing her, but it is hard for me to do it."

"Go away!" Darcy echoed. "Do you find it so impossible to forgive her? She was madly foolish, I admit, but the act has brought its own punishment. After all, she was little more than a child at the time."

Noel's face flushed.

"Do you understand me so little?" he said, slowly. "What she did, poor darling, was at the instigation of a villain, who had set his traps and trained his accomplices so well, that an older and a wiser head than hers might well have been deceived, while I, who ought to have known better, who should have believed, in her love and trust above everything—" He paused a moment, then concluded abruptly, "Why, my very thoughts of her during so many years have been insults!"

"And yet she will forgive you all!"

"I even refused to send the man away," Noel broke in, following out his own train of thoughts. "I remember her coming to me and saying, 'Noel, don't ask him to stay longer; make some excuse for his going away; I don't like him; I distrust him!' and I only laughed at her, and told her she had taken an unreasonable prejudice against him, which would pass off in time. Then afterward, when her words came back to me, I looked upon them as a blind, an artifice, to make me close my eyes to the truth!" And he groaned aloud.

"And yet she will forgive you all!"

"You do not know how I spoke to her in the wood this morning, believing her to be guilty. An angel from heaven could not pardon the words I said!"

"A woman forgives much when she loves!" replied Darcy, laconically.

"I have killed her love long since!" Noel said, in a voice.

"Do they not say that love never dies? Come Mr. Peyton, take my advice; I will venture to say that you will not regret having done so. Go to your wife, and tell her all that you have told me—that is, if she will let you do so. Call yourself a villain, a scoundrel, anything you like, and say you are going away because you know she can never forgive you; then wait for an answer. After all, if it is unfavorable, you will be no worse off than you were before."

A gleam of hope was in Noel's face as he heard his friend's counsel, and he moved toward the door, where he paused and looked at Darcy, who was watching him silently.

"Do you think me a maudlin fool?" he asked, half apologetically.

"I think you are a man very much to be envied," was the reply, as Darcy involuntarily stifled a sigh. "But, one moment, Peyton. You intend to have a look for that fellow—your worthy cousin? Well, I can't blame you. I should do as much myself. But what I want to know is, what are you going to do with him when you have caught him—eh?"

A fierce light came into Noel's eyes, and he clinched his fist and drew a long breath.

"I do not know," he said in suppressed tones.

"And upon that matter I can't advise you myself," the other returned, with a slight laugh. "Only keep within the bounds of the law."

As Noel closed the library door behind him, Dolly ran forward to meet him.

"What a long time you two have been in there!" she cried, excitedly. "I heard your chairs being pushed back, as I passed just now, so I waited to hear the result. Well, what news?"

He could not help smiling down at her eager, animated face.

"Your manner gives me confidence, Miss Charteris. It must surely be a good omen to meet such a bright, hopeful face upon the threshold of what may be to me a new life. But, first, how is my wife? I think you would not be here if she were not better."

"You are right. She woke up so much refreshed after her long sleep that I couldn't persuade her to stay in her room. She insisted upon getting up and coming down-stairs; but I don't think she was quite wise in doing that."

"I will go to her at once."

"Had I not better tell her you are coming?" asked Dolly, a little doubtfully. "Remember, she is not very strong yet."

"No, I think not. She might refuse to see me."

The voice, though perfectly courteous, was so decided that she did not venture to say any more, so merely pointed out the room to him.

He walked steadily enough up to it, but waited for a moment ere he opened the door. All was so quiet within. There was not a sound to be heard. He looked round irresolutely; but Dolly nodded and smiled at him encouragingly.

So, mustering up all his courage, he turned the handle.

Cecil was lying back in a huge arm-chair, her cheek resting on its crimson cushions, while her white hands lay idly in her lap, and her eyes were closed. The disfiguring close widow's cap had been removed, and her soft yellow hair was coiled round her graceful head.

She looked a mere girl as she lay there, so fragile and delicate. Noel thought she was asleep, so stayed quietly by her side, gazing at her with his heart in his eyes; then falling on his knees he ventured to touch her hand very gently with his lips.

At the touch she gave a sharp cry and, held out her arms.

"Cecil, darling!" he murmured in an ecstasy, as he clasped her close to his beating heart, as if he would never let her go from him again. That was all. No explanations, no mutual cries for pardon. Was it not enough for both to be near each other—to be in each other's arms once more?

CHAPTER IX.

SADNESS AND SUNSHINE.

MORE than six months had passed away since Mrs. Vane Charteris paid her eventful visit to Charteris Park, and in that time there had been many changes. Little Raymond was proved beyond a doubt to be the heir to his father's property, and he and his mother very soon settled down quite comfortably into their places.

One beautiful mild spring afternoon, as she and Dolly were sitting out on the terrace, the conversation happened to turn upon Felippo, the Italian lawyer.

"I am feeling bothered again," said Mrs. Charteris. "I've had another letter from Felippo."

She stopped to watch the effect of her words.

"On the old subject, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" the widow replied, blushing a little. "He begs me so hard to marry him, that I don't see how I can refuse. He reminds me that if it weren't for him I shouldn't be where I am. Not but that I'm sure I paid him very handsomely for what I did; and he loves me so!"

"I don't like the man, Mary; I never did," said Dolly. "There is something wrong about him. It's your money he wants. I feel sure of that."

"No, indeed!" Mrs. Charteris replied, decidedly, plunging her hand deep down into her pocket, pulling out a note. "My dear girl, just listen to this," and she began reading aloud:

"Some people, my dearest girl, will try and persuade you that it is your money I am in love with, and not your own sweet self; but do not be deceived by any one. You know better. You know how gladly I would take you without a penny. Nay, more; I would prefer your coming to me empty-handed, so that all the world might see how disinterested my love was, and how unmixed with any thoughts of worldly dross."

"There!" said the widow, triumphantly; "you see he calls my money 'worldly dross,' and would rather I had none."

Dolly felt a strong inclination to laugh, but with difficulty suppressed it.

"What sort of a father will he make for Ray?" she asked.

"Oh, Ray hates him! He'll never go near him. I'm sure I don't know why; for no one could be kinder to the child. He brought him a beautiful collar for Pablo when he was here, and Ray wouldn't so much as look at it. That naughty boy flung it at him!"

"Which do you prefer, this Signor Felippo or Ray?" Dolly said, mischievously.

Mrs. Charteris opened her eyes wide with astonishment at such a question.

"Why, Ray, of course!"

"Then, my dear Mary, why hesitate a moment? Write and tell this man, once for all, that you don't care for him."

"It will be no good," she replied, reflectively. "I've done so six times already, and he'll only

write me one of those beautiful, touching letters that make me feel so sorry for him."

"You don't write decidedly enough," Dolly protested. "Tell him plainly that you will never marry him, that you won't see him if he comes here, and that he is not to write to you again. The man isn't good enough for you."

The widow sighed.

"Well, my dear, I suppose I shall have to do what you say. You generally make me do what you like. But I'll tell you what it is. I believe the truth is that I am a little bit afraid of Felippo. He can get in such a rage when he is put out about anything! I sha'n't forget the day I told him I was going to marry your father. He had made up his mind to marry me himself, it appears, only he hadn't condescended to let me know his plans. If he had asked me before Vane did, I really think I should have taken him. I was so lonely after father died, and I fancy he partly guessed that, and it made him savage, for he saw it was too late."

"Was he a friend of your father's?"

"Yes; father liked him pretty well. You see he was the first friend we made, and he had been to the United States and spoke English very well, so could cheer us up when we felt homesick, which was pretty often."

"I wonder why your father left America?"

"Oh, he owed a lot of money!" Mrs. Charteris said, quite frankly; "only he never told me much about it—I suppose he didn't like to; and we could live so cheaply in that little Italian village. But there! I am not going to talk any more about my affairs. It's your turn now. Tell me about yourself. Do you still like your new home?"

"Yes; very much indeed. And you must come and see for yourself how cosey I am."

"The only time I nearly quarreled with you, Dolly, was when you insisted upon going off and living in that poky little cottage," said Mrs. Charteris, affectionately patting the girl's hand. "It was very horrid of you, Dolly, and I haven't quite forgiven you yet. It wasn't the right thing at all for you, who were brought up in every luxury, to be living on a sum scarcely sufficient to keep you in dress."

Mary, how dreadfully you exaggerate? If one girl and two servants can't live very comfortably indeed on two thousand a year, they ought to be ashamed of themselves!"

The widow was not to be convinced.

"Two thousand a year!" she grumbled. "What is that? Just a little more than double what I give Jarvis. But you are so self-willed, Dolly, and so proud. I believe you wouldn't even take so much as a crust of bread from me, though Ray is your own brother, and if it hadn't been for him you'd have been living here now with your horses and carriages. But there! I'm tired of talking to you. You only sit there and laugh, and go your own way after all. I've a great mind to give you a good shaking!"

But instead of carrying out the threat, she leaned forward, and the two friends, for such they truly were, exchanged a hearty kiss.

"Now, Dolly," she continued, in a brisker tone, "I want to hear about this clever Mr. Darcy of yours. How is it he has never been to see you all this long time? He hasn't been here since he saw you safely into your new house, and that's more than four months ago now."

"He is always so busy," Dolly answered, reddening a little. "He is working at some famous lawsuit, but finds time to write to me now and then, and in his last letter he said something about coming down in the early summer."

"Then he must stay here," Mrs. Charteris said, energetically. "I am not going to have him put up at the hotel, I can tell him, to be p with rheumatic fever from sleeping in unaired bed. So when you write, tell him that from me, Dolly, and say that I shall be proud and happy if he will honor me with a visit."

Long ago Mrs. Charteris's womanly eye had

discovered the girl's secret, and it was her great ambition to set matters straight between them; but Dolly was quite unconscious of it all.

"And all this time I've never asked after those nice people, the Peytons!" she continued. "Well, if I never before came across a happy couple, I did when I saw them. Why, he just worshiped the ground she trod on, and she was just the same pretty creature that she was. No wonder he is proud of her!"

"Yes, how happy they seem," Dolly assented. "I don't know where they are now. I have not heard for some time; but Cecil owes me a letter. My dear Mary, I must not stay chatting here any longer; it is positively getting dusk already. You are coming back with me, aren't you? Run and get your hat."

"My dear child, I really cannot. There's Ray's tea to see to, and he won't take it without mother. But we will go as far as the lodge with you. Now, Ray, come along, and bring Pablo. We are going to see sister Dolly a bit of the way home. But let me put this round your throat"—untying a scarf from her own neck; "it's chilly."

"How you spoil the boy!" Dolly said, laughingly. Then, in a lower voice, "Will Signor Felippo be as tender of him?"

Little Ray's quick ear caught the name.

"Felippo, mamma? I hate Felippo! He isn't coming here, is he? I've a good mind to set Pablo on Felippo, mamma; he's afraid of Pablo, the coward!"

Mrs. Charteris pulled one of his thick curls, and told him to be a good boy, and not to hate any one, but to run on and see that the gates were open, whereupon she turned round, and caught Dolly's meaning glance, and burst out laughing.

"What a life Ray will lead his new papa!" Dolly said.

"Ray will have no new papa!" the other returned, more decidedly than she had at yet spoken. "I am not going to have my pretty boy's high spirit broken!"

At the lodge they parted, the mother holding her boy's hand in hers, lingering a moment to watch the slight graceful figure wending its way down toward the village, Ray enthusiastically kissing his tiny hand as Dolly looked back and nodded to them before the turn in the road hid them from her sight. Then she paused, and gave rather a wistful glance over the green park, studded with groups of noble old trees, under whose shade she had played so often as a child. It was hard, undoubtedly very hard, to have to visit as a guest the house, where she had so long reigned as queen! But she was beginning to feel more resigned with her lot; so, after one little sigh to the memory of old times, she walked briskly on, for the short afternoon was already drawing to a close, and there was still more than a mile to traverse before she reached her home.

Good-natured Mrs. Charteris had wished very much to keep a horse for her use, so that she might not lose her rides; but she had from the first steadily set her face against receiving favors of any kind, and the only things she consented to take with her from Charteris Park were her piano and harp, both gifts from her father.

Mr. Darcy looked on in silence, admiring her independence, and saying no word to dissuade her. He helped her to select her simple furniture, and saw her comfortably installed in a small, though pretty house. Knowing how ignorant she was in all money matters, he made her believe that it was owing to his judicious investments that her income was doubled.

He was obliged to have recourse to that small fraud, for he knew well that she would not knowingly be indebted even to him. As it was, he had the satisfaction of seeing his darling provided with a good many comforts and luxuries, which all unconsciously she owed to him.

Having thus arranged matters for her welfare, he left her to herself, fully determined not

to see her again until he was quite able to banish all thoughts of love from his heart.

So bravely resisting all the temptations conveyed in Dolly's letters when she asked him, as she sometimes did, to come and see her in her new home, he stayed on in the city, working from early morning until the small hours of the night, and in consequence he was fast acquiring fame and fortune.

Men much his senior looked with envious eyes upon "that lucky Darcy" as they called him, and prophesied that he would be able to put the word "Judge" before his name before many more years rolled over his head.

One day, as he was returning from the law-courts, where he had been sitting through a tedious case which occupied many hours, his brain felt in a whirl, his head seemed on fire, and the feeling upon him was too strong to be resisted of breathing the fresh country air, of hearing the bird's sweet songs once more. If he stayed on in town much longer he argued to himself that he would be fit for nothing, so he would just wait for "Jarvis v. Trail" to come on and then he would run down to Charteris, even if he only stayed there for a few days.

That was how he put it to himself, trying hard to make believe that it was not for Dolly's sake that he quitted New York at the busiest time in the year.

That very day he wrote to his ward, and told her that she might expect him in the early summer.

His letter was very short, very abrupt; but such as it was, it was enough to cause a happy smile to linger on Dolly's lips, and to make the color flicker on her cheeks.

It was on that letter she pondered as she walked home from Charteris Park.

"The early summer," he had said. It was already the end of March; in a month, or at the most in two, she should see him once more. Ah, she would not feel dull and lonely any more with such a prospect before her! No matter if he only looked upon her as a friend, she would make the most of his friendship and be happy as in the dear old days, which now seemed so far away, when she had welcomed him so joyfully.

A quick footstep behind her broke in upon her meditations, and looking round, she saw Frank Temple, who was soon at her side, his handsome face flushed with the exertion he had made.

"I have had such a race to overtake you," he began, breathlessly. "Now, as a reward, may I walk home with you?"

"Of course you may," she said, giving him her hand. "Why are you so ceremonious? You know I am always glad of your company, and I am still foolish enough to be rather a coward in the dusk."

He did not relinquish her hand, but drew it within his arm, and for a moment or two they walked on in silence, Dolly so embarrassed at his unusual manner that she could think of nothing to say.

"I have just been up to Charteris," she said, at last, rather tamely.

"So Mrs. Charteris told me; in fact, she sent me after you."

"Poor woman!" Dolly said, with a little nervous laugh; "she cannot be reconciled to the idea of my living at Rose Cottage."

No answer came to that remark; but determined not to be snubbed, she essayed another.

"Mr. Darcy is, I hope, coming down soon."

"Oh, indeed! And pray what may he want here?"

"He says he has been working too hard, and wants change and rest."

"In other words, he means to trade on your sympathy."

Dolly, thoroughly annoyed, drew her hand from his arm.

"If you cannot be more polite, Frank, I prefer walking home alone."

"Forgive me, Dolly, for my rudeness; but I am madly in love, and feel madly jealous even of that good old fellow, Darcy."

It was her turn to wince at his words.

"I have told you before that you are not to be so foolish," she said, severely. "Why can't you be content to have me for a sister? We should not be half as good friends as we are if the fates had willed it otherwise."

"I'd like to chance it," he muttered, grimly.

"How I do wish you could come across some really nice girl," Dolly said, gently, "so that you might fall in love with her and get married! She would be such a nice friend for me!"

"You know it is impossible. Look here, Dolly! I know you have told me not to speak to you like this, but just for once you must let me. Dear, don't you think you could ever learn to care a little for me? I would be so patient, if only you could give me some hope. Don't answer now; take time to think. Don't send me away without saying you'll try at least, Dolly."

He had made her stop, and had both her hands in his, and there was a mist of tears shining in his usually merry blue eyes.

He was terribly in earnest; so much so, that Dolly's heart smote her as she remembered that she had spoken of his as a "boy's love," as changeable as the wind.

"You know I cannot say the only words that will please you," she said, trying to meet his gaze unflinchingly. "Dear Frank, won't you try and believe that I have no love to give you?"

"You might do anything you liked with me," he pleaded; "make me what you pleased. I won't be exacting. I will wait any time. Perhaps the love might come at last. But, oh, Dolly! won't you give me a chance?"

She shook her head so decidedly that his face changed, and all the eager excitement of his manner vanished.

"Ah, well," he said at last, "I have put my fate to the touch, and failed!"

"I am so very sorry, Frank!"

"Forgive me, dear!"—he felt remorse as he saw her sorrowful face. "It is not your fault, I know. I ought not to be angry with you, but I believe I have always thought that you would one day be my wife, ever since we were tiny children together, and it is hard to have to shatter the hopes of a lifetime." And he gave a great sigh. "Have I a rival, Dolly?" he said abruptly. "Has any one stolen your heart from me?—for if not, I sha'n't give up hoping even now."

He looked intently into her eyes, which fell beneath his penetrating gaze, and her cheeks reddened. He was answered.

"Is it so?" he said, sorrowfully. "Then all is indeed at an end. Perhaps some day, dear, I shall be able to wish you joy"—his voice trembling; "but not now—not now!"

Dolly covered her face with her hands.

"I wish I could tell you all, Frank."

"There is no need, dear. I know enough."

"No, you do not!" she cried, eagerly.

He interrupted her.

"No; I am not going to let you say any more. I will be generous. I won't even ask his name. It is enough for me that I have lost you. Now listen to me, and I will tell you what made me speak to you once more. I am going away."

"Going away?" she echoed.

"Yes, for a time. It will do me good. I have been at home too long."

"Where are you thinking of going to?"

"My father's friend, old General Seymour, wants me to go over to him in England. He says there is a splendid opening for me, where I shall be directly under his own eye."

"I shall be sorry to lose you," Dolly said, in a low voice; "but I think it is best you should go."

"I think so, too, now," Frank replied, with a stress on the last word.

"When must you go?"

"Ah, that's the thing!" he said, rather gloomily. "I must be there by the middle of next month, or the vacancy will be filled up."

"Then you would start—"

"In less than a week. I shall telegraph my acceptance to-morrow. So you see, Dolly, this is almost our good-by; for I must run up to town by the early train, and in all probability shall only have a few hours in Charteris just before I sail."

They had come within sight of the cottage now, and Frank came to a halt.

"I am so sorry!" was all poor Dolly could say.

The tears were very near the surface.

He gazed steadily into her eyes as he held her hand at parting.

"I am taking my last look of the Dolly Charteris I once knew," he said, softly. "What shall I find you on my return, I wonder? Good-bye! God bless my darling sister!"

Then, pressing her fingers once to his lips, he turned quickly away, and so passed out of her sight forever. In less than two short weeks gallant young Frank Temple had found a grave beneath the deep blue Atlantic waves.

He lost his life while endeavoring to save a comrade who had fallen overboard. The man sunk for the last time almost within his reach; and in returning, with the dead body held in one arm, Frank struck his head against some portion of the ship, and sunk back senseless.

A dozen tender hands lifted the two bodies, one almost as lifeless as the other, and every possible remedy that skill or love could suggest was attempted, but all to no avail. He only opened his eyes just long enough to smile into the kindly faces bent over him, murmured one holy name reverently and devoutly, then—fell asleep. There were but few dry eyes on the steamer, when, the next morning, he was lowered into the deep; for short as his stay among them had been, Frank's generous, affectionate nature had won for him many friends on board the City of London. Indeed, if anything could have lightened his mother's grief, it was the letter written by the captain when he informed her of her loss.

He spoke so highly of the esteem and regard in which Frank was held, and so touchingly of the last act which cost him his life, that tears of pride as well of sorrow filled her eyes.

He ended with the words:

"If I had a son, madam, I could wish for him no nobler death. You may well be proud of being the mother of so brave a boy!"

But we must return to Dolly, whom we left standing by her garden-gate.

Her heart was filled with sorrow at the idea of Frank's departure. Why could she not love him? she asked herself, almost angrily; and then there would be no occasion for him to leave. What would his mother say, who was so passionately attached to her boy? Would she suspect the reason for his going away, and, perhaps hate her as the cause of it? Oh, why would things always go wrong in this world?

Suddenly her musings came to an abrupt end; for, raising her eyes, she saw a figure standing by the open door whom she knew full well, though the dusk made it impossible to distinguish his features.

Dolly gave a little happy laugh, and, almost before she was aware of it, was up the garden path, folded in his arms, sobbing tears of joy upon his shoulder.

"Con, Con, is it you?"

Darcy was so agitated that at first he could find no words to reply, and could only hold her tight to him.

As she struggled to release herself from his embrace, he lifted the crimson face with one hand.

"Con, I am ashamed of myself. Let me go," she implored, her eyes falling beneath his.

"No, I shall not," he cried, exultantly, emboldened by the look he read there; "not until you tell me whether this welcome is for a friend or a lover."

"Which you please," she replied, half-laughing, her heart beating tumultuously. "Con, you are a tyrant! Let me go, sir!"

But he held her still, and bending his head, tried once more to see into her eyes.

"Then if I choose the latter?" he said, breathing hard.

"You always managed to have your own way—" she began, demurely.

But she was not allowed to say more, for her mouth was stopped by kisses, and this time she submitted to his caresses, lying passively in his arms.

"I can hardly believe I am not dreaming," Darcy said, presently. "Dolly, are you sure that you have not made a mistake, and that you will not by-and-by unfold your wings and soar away from me, and leave me here friendless and alone?"

"Not unless you want me to go."

"Oh, my darling, how happy you have made me! But think well what you are doing; remember what an old, prosy, gray-haired man you are accepting."

"You are not old; you are not gray-haired," she insisted.

"Dolly," Darcy said, severely, "you must not contradict me. I pulled a gray hair out only this morning; and I thought, as I stood before the glass, how wrinkled I was getting."

"If you were all covered with wrinkles, and your hair as white as snow, I should love you just as much."

"Dolly, say that again."

"How can I, when you stop my mouth like that. Con, what will the servants think if they see us? Now, come indoors. Have you had anything to eat since you left New York?"

"No."

"I thought not. You certainly do want some one to take care of you."

They moved slowly into the house, both faces aglow with love and happiness.

When the time came for Con to say "Good-bye," Dolly went with him as far as the garden-gate, and as they waited there a moment, watching the stars come out one by one in the calm blue sky, Dolly rested her head on her lover's shoulder, his strong arm supporting her, her eyes gazing dreamily up into the heavens.

"Poor Frank!" she said; "I wish he were as happy as I am!"

"Yes, poor Frank!" her companion echoed, as he bent to kiss the upturned face.

CHAPTER X.

VENGEANCE IS MINE.

A SULTRY morning toward the end of July; not a breath of wind discernible; and though the three long windows of an apartment in one of the Paris hotels are thrown wide open to admit any passing breeze, the lace curtains are motionless.

Lying languidly back in a lounging chair was a lady still young and beautiful, slowly waving a large fan back and forth, rather as if the exertion were too great for her.

The scent of hot-house flowers filled the room, for flowers were everywhere; stands of them filled the windows, adorned the numerous little tables; flowers nestled in her soft golden hair, and in the bosom of her embroidered muslin robe.

A firm step in the corridor outside made Cecil—for it was she—spring from her recumbent attitude, and, in a moment, all traces of languor had vanished from her face.

The gentleman who entered threw his hat aside, and embraced her with as great a warmth as though he had not seen her two hours previously.

"I have been so lonely without you, Noel!"

"Have you, my dearest? Yet I could not get home before."

His voice had an anxious ring in it, and his face looked worried as he pulled forward a chair, and seating himself in it, passed his hand wearily across his forehead.

Cecil sunk down on the carpet, and waited for him to speak.

"I have had news of Thornhill," he began, presently. "He is here, in Paris."

His wife drew a long breath, and crept a little closer to him.

"What will you do?" she asked, in a hushed voice.

"I must see him—I have decided upon that; but afterward I do not quite know."

"How did you hear of him?"

"Jackson ferreted him out at last. It has taken the fellow ten months to do it. Thornhill seemed to have had an idea that he was being watched for some purpose, and he always managed to elude him. Now, however, there is no doubt. We have got him at last!"

"Did Jackson write to you?"

"No; he telegraphed. I have only just had the message. The address given is some street the other side of the river."

"I wonder whether he has any money?" Cecil said, musingly. "It is strange that he should allow himself to be tracked!"

"I should fancy he is not in very flourishing circumstances, if one may judge from the style of address," her husband said, reading from the telegram:

"Rue du Petit St. Jacques, 45, 4me etage."

"The fellow is ill, it seems."

"And perhaps as wretched and poor as you once were, Noel."

He looked at her intently, but did not speak. She raised herself to her knees, and clasped her hands round his arm.

"If you find him very miserable, very repentant, Noel, what then?"

"And you plead for him, Cecil—you, to whom he has done the greatest wrong that a man can do?"

He spoke very gravely, but calmly

"As I would plead for the vilest criminal who repented. Remember, Noel, I only said if he were really penitent. Are we the ones to judge him?"

He put her from him very gently, and took a few long strides up and down the room. She watched him, but not anxiously, for she knew she had triumphed. Then he came to a stand before her, and placed both hands on her shoulders.

"And so, Cecil, if the man says he is sorry, I am to take his word for it, and forget the past and the eight years' suffering he has made us endure?"

"Have we not agreed to forget that already, Noel?"

"And now, when the villain is within my grasp, I am to open my hand and let him go—is that what you want, Cecil?—and so forego my long cherished revenge?"

"No; I ask nothing from you," she said, her eyes shining. "I can trust you, Noel, to do all that is generous, noble and good!"

"My own sweet wife!" he said, in low, intense tones, as he strained her to his breast. Pray God I may never disappoint your trust in me!"

Ten minutes afterward he was driving rapidly in the direction of the Rue du Petit St. Jacques.

In the pocket of the light coat he wore he carried a loaded revolver. He had not told his wife that he intended doing so, for he was afraid she would be frightened; but not knowing in what sort of company he should find himself, he thought it as well to be on the safe side.

The carriage had long left the respectable streets far behind, and was now threading its way among a labyrinth of closely packed narrow lanes and alleys, swarming with low, scowling-faced men in blue blouses and sabots, and half-dressed, brazen-looking women, who thrust their heads into the carriage window to stare at the person who had ventured to intrude into their midst.

Noel was not sorry when the vehicle came to a halt.

The coachman turned round to say, "Forty-five, Rue du Petit St. Jacques, monsieur;" and as Noel descended, he looked with a sort of horror at the place in which he found himself.

Quite a little crowd had gathered around him, gesticulating and chattering, blowing coarse tobacco-smoke into his face. They hustled and jostled him until he felt their hot,

garlicky breath on his very cheek. He felt sick and faint; but with the aid of his stick and broad shoulders forced himself clear.

"I have come to see a gentleman who is lodging in Number forty-five," he shouted out, in a loud voice.

"Ohe!" was exclaimed by a dozen stentorian lungs; "it is Mere Marmotte who is wanted."

A fat, greasy-faced old woman came forward with an air of importance; and, opening the door, ushered Noel into her domicile with much ceremony.

"And now what did monsieur require?"

"Merely to see one of madame's lodgers."

"Lodgers? She has many. Her rooms were always full—ah, the boys knew where to come for cleanliness, good living! *Ma foi*, she was a mother to her lodgers! And which of them might monsieur wish to see?"

"An American—by name Thornhill—who lived *au quatrième*."

"Thornhill! She knew not the name, but there certainly was an *Americaine au quatrième*. He was very sick."

"That is the gentleman."

"Ah, well, if monsieur will condescend to follow me up-stairs!"

Monsieur did condescend, and tried to steer his way clear of the numerous pitfalls which beset him in the shape of large holes.

Madame, as she preceded him, discoursed volubly on the negligence of the carpenter, who had again and again neglected to mend those dangerous places.

"Six times, if monsieur will believe me, have I sent to that imbecile—pig that he is! But here we are arrived. That is the door. Monsieur will find me below when he departs."

Without ceremony Noel entered the room, but it was so dark that for a time he could see nothing. As his eyes became more accustomed to the obscurity, he made out what looked like a heap of rags in one corner, out of which shone two burning eyes.

There was apparently nothing else in the room—no table, no chair, no bed, unless that could be called a bed on which the wretched being lay. As he looked around him all feelings of revenge vanished, melted away indeed at the sight of so much misery, like snow before the sunshine.

"Thornhill!" he cried, in a choked voice.

"Who is it that calls me by that name?" came the reply in hollow accents, accompanied by a peculiar rattling sound in the throat. "Thornhill! Yes; I was once known as Thornhill, but not for years now."

Noel strode forward and knelt down on the boards by the sick man's side. The figure before him had the face and form of an old man. His hair and beard were perfectly white, and his cheek-bones stood out distinctly. His fleshless hands picked away unceasingly at the ragged coat which formed his coverlet, and his eyes wandered round and round—never at rest.

Noel groaned aloud. Was this the careless, happy, merry Thornhill he could remember?

"Who are you?" went on the querulous tones. "I don't know you! Why do you come here?"

"Thornhill," said Noel, as he laid his hand gently on the naked shoulder, "look at me! Tell me my name!"

The ever-shifting eyes rested once upon the face so near his own, and then the miserable wretch recoiled with a shudder.

"Noel, it is you!" he cried, shaking in every limb. "You have come to ask after her! I do not know where she is; no, not if you killed me could I tell you!"

"No, Thornhill, not that; my wife is safe and well. I found her long since."

"Then you have come to have your revenge! Take it, then! Laugh at me! Jeer at me lying bere—I cannot prevent you! Say what you will! Do what you will! Are you satisfied? Taunt me in my misery! Say it is the

reward of my evil deeds! Well, I acknowledge it. Since I tried to lure her away all has gone wrong with me! I have gone downhill until I have become what you see me! Now, Noel, why don't you laugh? Laugh, man!—laugh, I say!" The sentence ended in a violent fit of coughing, and a blood-tinged foam settled on his lips.

Noel tenderly supported him until the paroxysm ceased; then, taking off his own coat, folded it so as to form a pillow, and placed it under the sick man's head.

Thornhill looked at him wonderingly.

When he spoke again his voice was grown much weaker.

"I'd have almost sworn there were tears in your eyes if the idea were not too absurd," he said, making a feeble attempt to smile. "I suppose next you'll say you are sorry for me; that you forgive me, and all that, eh?"

There was a piteous entreaty in his dimming eyes, though he tried to speak carelessly.

"God knows how truly I forgive you everything, Charlie!" Noel said, solemnly.

"Charlie!" echoed the man; "that's like old times. I believe you do forgive me when you call me Charlie. Noel, I will say now what I never thought I should say to any man—I am sorry!"

His eyes were closing fast, and he spoke with an effort.

Noel drew the poor weary head down to his shoulder, and began gently stroking one of the restless hands. He knew there was nothing to be done save wait for the end. Presently he bent down and whispered something into the dying man's ear.

Thornhill opened his eyes wide, with a look of bewilderment.

"Eh, what, Noel? What did you say? Has she forgiven me, too?"

Noel nodded assent.

There were long pauses between the sentences. His breath grew every moment shorter and feebler.

One gasp for breath, one convulsive movement of the limbs, and Charles Thornhill's head fell heavily back. He was dead!

THE END.

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